

The best ever?

The 'Wimbledon of squash' returns indoors this year to Hull's Sports Arena and Richard Eaton predicts two outstanding championships

Could this become the best British Open ever? It has certainly never had such a star-studded entry before.

It has usually been billed as the world's oldest tournament and often as the most important. It has frequently billed itself as the best, even though once or twice in recent years it wasn't.

And it is true that throughout its 92-year history it has been more remarkable than any tournament. Just think: Hashim Khan, Azam Khan, Geoff Hunt, Jonah Barrington, Jahangir Khan, Jansher Khan, Heather McKay, Susan Devoy, Michelle Martin, Sarah Fitz-Gerald – golden names, blue riband accolades, great tales, vivid memories.

But despite all this, the 2014 British Open looks exceptional. Has it ever had so many record-breakers or so many different players capable of winning?

It has the only Englishman ever to win the World Championship (Nick Matthew), the only Englishwoman ever to win both the World Championship and British Open (Laura Massaro), a record-breaking seven-times women's world champion (Nicol David) and a defending men's champion who has been labelled as the world's most talented racket sports player (Ramy Ashour).

It also has the most successful male player of the 21st century (Amr Shabana), the world's top-ranked man (Gregory Gaultier) and a teenaged woman who may prove better than them all (Nour El Sherbini). That's seven different players, all boasting uniquely brilliant achievements.

There has surely never been anything quite like this. Nor has there been an occasion so special for the English, for it will be the first time a men's and women's world champion from England have ever been in action at the same tournament. Matthew and Massaro will gain more plaudits and sell more tickets than anybody.

“

It is a pivotal phase in squash history

“

Of course, there are other outstanding players too, but perhaps nothing better reflects the stylistic variety with which the game is now played than this magnificent seven.

Ramy Ashour jumps for joy after becoming the first Egyptian winner of the British Open since 1966 in Hull last year



Nicol David reaches for a drop shot on the way to beating Nour El Sherbini in the 2012 Allam British Open final in the O2

It could hardly be more fortunate that they are around now either, for it is a pivotal phase in squash history. They will create a magnetic British Open at a time when squash could yet be heading into the Olympics.

Furthermore, they should be able to put on a great show more comfortably this year, as the Allam British Open is returning indoors, to Hull's Sports Arena.

The venue is part of the same complex as the stadium of Hull City football club, where freakish weather blighted last year's Open, the first time a major squash tournament had been held outdoors in England.

Matches this time will be staged in conditions where players will know what to expect. Outdoor pioneering may be risked again at the British Open one day, but this year's certainties are timely.



Massaro may face extra pressure



David may especially welcome the greater sense of security it will guarantee. This is her first tournament since failing to meet what many regarded as her destiny in the quest for an eighth world title before her home crowd.

How quickly she recovers from that setback will depend on her attitude to it. She has clearly been working on it.

"Losses will always happen," David said. "It is about how you manage them for the next time. At this level there is little room to slip up. Things will not go your way every time."

The healing process may have been helped because "next time" is the Allam

British Open. It has offered immediate opportunities to occupy her mind by sitting down with Liz Irving, her coach, and working out how best to prepare.

David admits to having tried to do too much in Penang. Her PR schedule was draining. Now it is a matter of being "a bit clearer" in her head, she says, of being honest, and moving on. She has done that by paying extra attention to detail.

"When it doesn't go your way, you make things more consistent and more refined with everything you do," she said. "I trained really hard at the beginning of the year and leading up to the Worlds. I can benefit from that if I keep building on it."

She concluded pertinently: "It's great that the pressure is not on me this time. I can probably enjoy myself more and enjoy the game more."

David also has a favourable draw. Her Penang conqueror, 18-year-old El Sherbini, is in the other half, so David could progress via a quarter-final with France's Camille Serme or Egypt's Omneya Abdel Kawy to a semi-final with Joelle King, the fourth-seeded New Zealander, or Alison Waters, the fifth seed from England.

This time Massaro may be the one with a semi-final against El Sherbini, which would be a repeat of the world final. However, it might instead be Low Wee Wern, against whom Massaro saved four match points in the world quarter-finals, or Raneem El Welily, the third-seeded Egyptian whom she beat in four games in Penang.

Massaro handled the pressure of being favourite in that up-and-down final with courage, despite feeling sick all day. She may face extra pressure here too after becoming the first home woman in 22 years to win the British Open last year.

However, Massaro has worked out her mindset to cope with being the title holder. "I do see myself as defending

champion," she said. "My achievement in winning the British Open is amazing. I didn't think I would achieve that. I have the title under my belt, which a lot of people don't have.

"So in some ways the pressure is off. It's nice not to have pressure, but I want to defend the title and do as well as I possibly can. I will try for another British Open title. I will give everything I have for that.

"At the same time I am number two and she (Nicol David) is number one, so she will be favourite. All the expectation will be on her."

If Massaro needed further incentive, the women's prize money has been increased from \$90,000 to \$100,000. "This is definitely a good sign that we are progressing," David commented.

Nevertheless, the men's prize fund is 50 per cent higher at \$150,000. Their field is very impressive, with at least six potential winners.

Ashour, who was compared with Swiss tennis legend Roger Federer and Malaysian badminton maestro Lee Chong Wei during last year's debate about the greatest racket sports player, became the first Egyptian in nearly 50 years to win the British Open – but this time he is not the top seed.



The men's field is very impressive



Now it is the time-defying Matthew, who will be almost – but not quite – the oldest winner of the British Open in the professional era if he wins it for a fourth time. Hunt was 34 years and one month when beating Jahangir in 1981, while Matthew is 33 and 11 months.

To prolong his career, Matthew has wisely reduced his tournament schedule and says he feels more pressure-free than he has ever been. "I went through a phase where I put pressure on myself to achieve something and achieved more than I imagined I would," he admitted.

"You get to an age where you enjoy small things – like the days when your body feels great, or you're moving well, or hitting the ball well – because you appreciate that it doesn't always happen. You realise at some point you might decrease in standard or fall off a cliff.

"You get important perspective from little things. You have a great training session and you want to go to Twitter and tell everyone. I like people to think I am getting older. I like people to underestimate me."

Ashour claims his biggest motivation is connecting with people who are happy

when he wins. Because he has had a lot of enthusiastic cosmopolitan support at the British Open, it has helped him make a bit of history.

However, much will depend on his fitness. He returned after a two-month injury break at the Swedish Open in February, when he lost in five games to Matthew. The following month he lost the Windy City Open final in Chicago to Gaultier in straight games.

Soon afterwards, though, he was back to form, winning the World Series Finals in Richmond, USA, by beating Mohamed Elshorbagy in the final and then capturing the El Gouna title in April by repeating his success against his younger compatriot.

Even though Gaultier had by then returned to world no.1, he was beaten by Elshorbagy, who has risen to his highest ranking at three and at the age of 23 could be a bigger threat than he has ever been.

Ashour is only the third seed because his concern to prevent injury has limited

his schedule. It has also brought refinements to his movement and technique by getting lower on the ball.

Matthew should face Elshorbagy in the semi-finals, which may prove a tough test, while Gaultier might be landed with a quarter-final against Shabana, the four-times former world champion who is seeking another big title despite being nearly 35, and a semi-final with Ashour.

The second-seeded Frenchman therefore has a tougher draw than Matthew, who is nevertheless wary of the greater consistency Gaultier has these days.

There are many others who could influence the final outcome, and one other, James Willstrop, who could win it if he has a great week. The ex-world no.1 has been within one shot of becoming British Open champion in two different years and he might test the quality of Ashour's title defence in the quarter-finals.

Predictions? Only one is a safe bet – that the tournament is a certain winner.

The Magnificent Seven



OPEN FACTFILE

DATES

Monday 12 – Sunday 18 May

EVENT SPONSOR

Dr. Assem Allam

EVENT PARTNERS

University of Hull, Springfield Solutions, Isportstore.com, ASB, East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Eon, Mantis, PSA, WSA, ESR

HIGH NOON

The tournament starts at noon on May 12 with the brilliantly attacking Egyptian, Karim Abdel Gawad, playing a qualifier.

SCHEDULE

Sat 10: Men's Qualifying
 Sun 11: Men's Qualifying Finals, Women's Qualifying
 Mon 12: Men's Round One, Women's Qualifying Finals
 Tue 13: Men's Round One, Women's Round One
 Wed 14: Round Two
 Thu 15: Round Two
 Fri 16: Quarter-finals
 Sat 17: Semi-finals
 Sun 18: Finals
 May 14-18: Masters (University of Hull)

TITLE RECORDS (selected)

MEN		
Jahangir Khan	(Pakistan)	10
Geoff Hunt	(Australia)	8
Hashim Khan	(Pakistan)	7
F. D. Amr Bey	(Egypt)	6
Jonah Barrington	(England)	6
Jansher Khan	(Pakistan)	6
David Palmer	(Australia)	4
Nick Matthew	(England)	3
Ramy Ashour	(Egypt)	1
Gregory Gaultier	(France)	1

* In 2013 Ashour became the first Egyptian to win the title since A. A. AbouTaleb in 1966

WOMEN		
Heather McKay	(Australia)	16
Janet Morgan	(England)	10
Susan Devoy	(New Zealand)	8
Michelle Martin	(Australia)	6
Nicol David	(Malaysia)	4
Rachael Grinham	(Australia)	4



It's an open Open!

Laura Massaro (England) 1
* In 2013 Massaro became the first British winner since Lisa Opie in 1991

TRAVEL

Distance: London-Hull 210 miles
Timings: 4 hours by car, 3 hours by train

VENUES

Hull's Sports Arena hosts the Allam British Open for the first time. The indoor sports hall has been the site for many sports, including basketball, netball, volleyball, boxing, darts and five-a-side football, along with an array of conferences, trade fairs and exhibitions, since opening in January 2003. The championships have moved back to a more traditional indoor setting after last year's outdoor experiment at the neighbouring football and rugby league KC Stadium.

University of Hull Sports Centre, Inglemire Lane, Hull, HU6 7TS – Qualifying, Women's R1 and Masters
The Sports Arena Hull, West Park, Walton Street, Hull, HU3 6GA – Main draw matches

ACCOMMODATION

Hallmark Hotel 01482 645212
(hallmarkhotels.co.uk)

TICKETS

To book tickets visit ticketmaster.co.uk or call 0844 847 2419. The Monday and Tuesday (May 12 and 13) present a great opportunity to see the all world's best players compete in the oldest and most prestigious squash championships in the world for just £10!

PRIZE FUNDS

Men: \$150,000
Women: \$100,000

SQUASH ON TV

Sky Sports – squashplayer.co.uk/tv for listings
SquashTV.com – for match streamings
YouTube – youtube.com/user/psasquashtv for free clips and highlights

WEBSITE

britishopensquash.net



National champion Alison Waters explains what it would mean to her to win the British Open for the first time

I have some great memories of the British Open from an early age. I remember going to watch when it was being played at Wembley and I always remember it was such a great setting and atmosphere that one day I wanted to play in a tournament like that. I had an autograph book and I used to run down and get the players' signatures after the matches had finished. I was a bit shy, so I think my family had to encourage me to go and ask the players! I always remember the music that they used to play when the players walked onto the court and, funnily enough, they played it at the TOC tournament this year, which brought the memories flooding back.

The British Open is one of the most

important events of the year. The event has such a big history and there are so many great names on the trophy that is the 'Wimbledon' of squash. It's a very big target for me and I would love to get my name on the trophy.

I think it's a great idea to move the event indoors this year to the Hull Sports Arena. Last year was played outdoors in Hull City football club's stadium, which was a first for squash. It was a great venue, but you can't really rely on the English weather – as we found out last year.

It's great that the prize money has increased this year for the women. That's a big thanks to England Squash & Racketball and Dr Allam. We had our first equal prize money event last year at the U.S. Open, which was a massive step forward for us. Also, our National Championships had equal prize money this year for the first time, so hopefully this is the start of things to come as we make a big push for equal prize money, which I think we deserve.

The title is wide open this year, which makes for a very exciting event. Obviously on paper, Nicol David is the favourite, but Laura Massaro is the defending champion and current world champion, so she will be looking to retain her title. A lot of players, including me, will be looking to get their name on the trophy for the first time and on the day I think anyone can win it. It's too tough to call what will happen. Bring on Hull!



OPEN STATS

- This is the first time England has had both the men's and women's world champions in any tournament (Nick Matthew and Laura Massaro).
- Massaro is the first Englishwoman for more than 50 years trying to retain the British Open title.
- This the first occasion in which any Englishwoman has ever competed as both world and British Open champion.
- Matthew will equal the achievements of Azam Khan, of Pakistan, and David Palmer, of Australia, if he wins the British Open for a fourth time.
- Matthew is only two months younger than Geoff Hunt, the oldest British Open champion of the professional era.
- Ramy Ashour is the first Egyptian trying to successfully defend the British Open title since Abdelfattah AbouTaleb in 1966.
- Nour El Sherbini, a finalist two years ago and the World Championship runner-up in March, is trying to become the first Egyptian woman ever to win the British Open.
- Amr Shabana, another Egyptian, who is 35 in July, would become the oldest winner of the British Open in the professional era if he achieves his ambition to win one more major title here.
- Six players in the men's draw have held the world no.1 ranking (Matthew, Greg Gaultier, Ashour, Shabana, Karim Darwish and James Willstrop).
- The prize money for the women's championship reached six figures in dollars after sponsor Dr Assem Allam added \$10,000 to its total fund. The men's is 50 per cent bigger at \$150,000.
- Hull is the UK City of Culture in three years' time.
- The British Open is seeking a new sponsorship for next year.