



Matter over mind

Richard Eaton reports on a Men's World Open as mentally revealing as it was physically spectacular

Tears by the Persian Gulf as a great young talent loses the World title to his friend, and disappears from the seaside show-court for a quarter of an hour's solitary grieving. It delayed the prize-giving, had the officials in a flap, and provided a nice little story for those wanting to extract human interest from the World Open to project squash onto a wider stage.

But it had a less superficial, more squash-specific meaning too. Ramy Ashour's tears after his straight-games loss to Amr Shabana in an unexpectedly one-sided final expressed the frustration of a talent which many were certain would be the sport's most successful by now – and raise the question as to whether it ever will.

Shabana had no doubt about that. "He's going to get to quite a few finals before he has done," he reckoned. "It was my day today, but I am sure he will get plenty."

They were words you might expect from someone who now has an indisputable place in the pantheon of the greats, and whose performance in his 11-8, 11-5, 11-5 win contained sensible, highly accurate squash, a steady attitude and seeming invulnerability. But are they true?

SHABANA VS ASHOUR

Shabana's was perhaps a modest attainment against an opponent who fell disappointingly away and wasted too much emotional energy fretting about the refereeing, but it did reveal his increasing adaptability. This was not the brilliantly creative player who captured his first World Open six years ago in Lahore.

Shabana tailored his tactics to the occasion, kept his mind under control, volleyed plenty, preserved his physical resources, contained well, and respected the orthodoxies. Only when he was two games up did he unleash a flurry of winners, taking him to 4-0 and deflating Ashour's already punctured morale irreparably.

The most memorable of them was a sudden, stretching volley to a ball of good width, which Shabana somehow reached whilst maintaining perfect balance and sensitive control of the

racket face. The resulting shot scuttled along the wall like a gecko, and Ashour could not scrape it off.

Shabana was helped significantly by the introduction of a rest day before the final, for he had had a tough, 80-minute semi-final with James Willstrop. Indeed this innovation may even have influenced the destination of the title.

"It was good to have that – it's as it should be," Shabana said. "Often in the past you didn't get a good final because someone was tired by the time they got there. But we should be rested, and should be fresh for the final."

The Egyptian is the most successful player of the millennium. His four World Open titles place him level with the great Geoff Hunt, who was watching, and behind only the two Pakistani legends, Jahangir Khan, who was also watching, and Jansher Khan.

His greatness became evident relatively late in his career, but he has developed excitingly since, although whether it will continue to be a matter for debate. Shabana claimed he is okay "for a few more" World titles yet, but skilful management of his schedule may be the key. His body has become more injury-prone.

But is Shabana right about Ashour? Was it really "my turn to win this time, that's all." There seem reasons to doubt it.

Ashour can still be the most exciting player of all in the way he attacks in unstoppable bursts. But in addition to injuries, which have held him back, a worrying problem seems to be the doubting that goes on inside his head. It is a weakness which by now we thought he would have grown out of.

Ashour was arguing with referee Nasser Zahran as early as 6-8 in the first game, and by the second he was banging the handle of his racket angrily on the wall. When he lashed the ball furiously against the back wall in the general direction of the Egyptian official after being refused a let, he got a code-of-conduct warning.

In the third, Ashour sarcastically asked "Can I get that?" and on being told by Zahran that he could, he proffered an ironic "Thank you." Hardly critical maybe, but perhaps symptomatic of an attitude which he expressed when

he returned from his iachrymose out.

"All I can say is that he played very well. He was more consistent than I was. The referees fucked me up," Ashour said.

Shabana did not sound so sympathetic to that. "It's a difficult job, and it's never going to be 100 per cent," he said. "You get calls you don't like, and you have to live with them."

Shabana's maturity made Ashour's instabilities appear more conspicuous. Year by year he has become more aware of himself, of his surroundings, and of what his sport requires of him.

The substantial Egyptian and Muslim support in Kuwait was delighted by his habit of answering questions in Arabic, even though they were posed in English. Master of ceremonies Robert Edwards occasionally jokes, as perhaps he has to, about the possible insults which Shabana might be sharing with the crowd while he himself smiles on, oblivious. But it is not a joke. Shabana, intentionally or not, is making a point. A major event in the Middle East could do with being appropriated, for a few moments at least, by Middle Eastern culture.

Shabana's style – accurate, patient, conservative and seasoned in a way which would have seemed quite unlike him not long ago – were a striking example to his young compatriot.

For these were not Ashour's only wayward moments. He had become sucked into racket throwing against Peter Barker in the quarter-finals when he allowed the seventh-seeded Englishman back into it in the third and fourth games. And there was a strangely fruitless dialogue with the referee despite his encouraging semi-final win over Gregory Gaultier, the world number one, 11-5, 11-9, 12-10.

ASHOUR VS GAULTIER

Ashour benefited from Gaultier taking a nasty fall at a crucial moment in the second game, though later, on match ball, he was painfully denied the match when the ball was drilled right up his backside.

"He had plenty of the court to hit into," complained Ashour to the referee, his mildest criticism coming in the most stressful circumstances of all. It brought

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a warning from the referee to Gaultier. "Do you think I did it on purpose?" the Frenchman retorted.

Ashour won because he found something brilliant and different when he most needed it, catching his opponent unawares, and on this occasion it was Gaultier who self-destructed. He unaccountably let slip leads of 9-8 in both the second and third games, afterwards himself launching into a tirade about refereeing.

"It was one European, one Egyptian and one South African, and I still get screwed," he alleged, although he did not quite have the nationalities right. "I didn't get one single let throughout the match. I can't believe it."

As with Ashour, one of the biggest factors in Gaultier's loss was psychological. True, the Frenchman did not argue with the referee as much as he sometimes does, but dissent was on his mind, and it affected his performance. In his post-match despair, it became an alibi too.

Gaultier had explained why his mind gets trapped in these authority-challenging cul-de-sacs. "Sometimes it's hard because you are so passionate," he said, as if he had become used to observing himself in the second person.

"Sometimes when you feel like it's stolen ... you know I am really an honest guy, and I like honesty. I don't like injustice, that's the thing," adding enigmatically: "Sometimes you might be wrong, thinking of this. But sometimes it's the truth and you have to deal with these things."

After Gaultier's consistent excellence this year, the loss was a big blow.

"I have to recover quickly from this and focus on the next tournament [the Qatar Classic] straight away, as I'm very disappointed with what has happened," Gaultier commented. "I don't want to think about it."

But will he be able to do that? His remaining years at the top may well be affected by his capacity, or incapacity, to block such thoughts out. Gaultier certainly appears to have improved his mental skills with the help of his mind coach, Mathieu Benoit. But without further progress, he may always find the World Open elusive.

GAULTIER VS MATTHEW

To be fair, there were excuses which Gaultier might have made, and did not. He was fractionally less lively than the night before against Nick Matthew, when

he had a hard, five-game, 83-minute tussle with the British Open champion.

The slight physical diminishment which ensued may even have contributed to the fall which Gaultier suffered when 9-8 up in the second game of his semi-final, his front foot sliding away from him during a lunge in the front left corner. It almost dragged him into the splits, and caused a three-minute injury time-out. It also affected Gaultier's mind, and when he returned he lost the next three points and the vital second game.

Matthew therefore almost certainly had a part in the world number one's downfall.

He was not far from reaching the semi-final himself – a remarkable achievement considering that doctors had predicted he might still be rehabbing from his ankle injury during the World Open. Instead, the Yorkshireman avenged himself impressively in straight games for his loss to Cameron Pilly in the Petrosport Open, and looked capable of beating Gaultier when he led 3-1 in the fourth before going down 11-8, 8-11, 11-2, 6-11, 4-11.

But this was a different Gaultier. In a fascinating late-night match he survived a severe test of character, temperament and brains. The advantage swung backwards and forwards till beyond midnight, before Gaultier's increases of pace in the second, fourth and fifth games proved decisive. He was at last able to score points with more penetration and regularity, regaining a control which had appeared to be slipping away.

Ironically, this required just the mental qualities which he was unable to muster the following day. "Yes, I was strong," Gaultier said, excitedly, before coming out with the quote which brought laughter.

"I told myself the third was rubbish. I just didn't play tactically as I was supposed to, and I was losing my focus. So I put this game in the garbage can and I started again."

WILLSTROP VS ASHOUR

The other leading Brit, James Willstrop, did even better, beating two big names, reaching the semis, and showing that he was good enough to have gone even further. He was not far from beating Shabana.



Gregory Gaultier slips at a crucial moment against Rami Ashour in their semi-final



And lest we think that Gaultier and Ashour, the two players who self-destructed, were the only critics of the refereeing, it is worth pointing out that Willstrop joined that group after his 5-11, 9-11, 11-6, 9-11 loss to the eventual champion.

But in every other way Willstrop was a winner. He had fine victories over Karim Darwish and Thierry Lincou. His movement is nearly back to what it was before his operation and his squash is possibly even better, mixing more pragmatism with his exciting stroke-making.

Against both Darwish, the top seed, and Lincou, a former World champion, Willstrop sensed that he could drag errors from his opponents by lengthy periods of containing. He did not plan it that way, but he sensed that it might work.

Against Darwish it did so gradually, especially when it really mattered, when Willstrop was 4-7, 6-8 and then 8-9 down in the fourth game, and squeezed him through to an 11-7, 11-7, 3-11, 11-9 victory. Against Lincou it worked much more consistently, carrying him to an 11-9, 11-5, 11-5 win.

THE REST

Other Englishmen also had their moments. Alister Walker, still trying to achieve a balance between discipline and expression, suggested he was almost on a par with Lincou during an 2-11, 8-11, 11-4, 6-11 loss – though he thought that he should have done

better, especially from 6-6 in the fourth.

Daryl Selby showed durability and focus in beating the 12th-seeded Mohammed Azlan Iskander 11-7, 7-11, 9-11, 11-7, 11-8 in the tournament's longest match, two hours and a quarter. And Barker had Ashour stressed for a while, especially when holding the defending champion at 7-7 in the fourth.

The tournament's biggest upset?

Probably not Gaultier's loss, nor Ashour's, but the defeat of David Palmer, the man who had saved match balls in both the 2002 and 2006 finals but who was now lacking match practice due to coaching commitments in the United States.

The Australian's 12-14, 10-12, 7-11 first-round loss to the young Egyptian Tarek Momen was his worst World Open result for more than a decade, prompting speculation that at 33 Palmer might have played his last.

He hopes to play in the 2010 World Open in Saudi, he says, and would rather retire after the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in October. He still remembers how sickness helped deny him a gold medal nearly four years ago in Melbourne.

Throughout all this, many of us had

not forgotten that we were watching rather more than just the world's richest squash event. And if we had, we were reminded of it by the quarter of an hour's colossally spectacular firework display that concluded the tournament, which itself must have cost a fortune.

A waste of money? Well, this is the country for which squash, through the Liberation Cup in 1992, was an expression of escape from one of the world's worst tyrants.

Since then it has become a way of remembering and honouring one of its royal family, Sheikha Al Saad, snatched from this world at the age of only 38. So the pyrotechnics were perhaps as much about Kuwaiti national pride as about international sport.

As was the water-bordered Green Island venue – more than 3,000 metres across, created on reclaimed land adorned with 150,000 coloured shrubs and seedlings, with its swimming pool which ebbs and flows with the tide, its 700-seat amphitheatre and its 35-metre-high tourist tower – which more than maintained squash's reputation for startling tournament venues.

A pity the IOC has yet to grasp its image-making potential.



Shabana celebrates his fourth World title