

ALI FARAG

In part four of his discussion on tactics with the world champion, Ian McKenzie asks Ali Farag about using SquashTV, game plans and patterns of play

Is SquashTV useful in learning about your opponents and preparing a game plan?

Yes, you study your opponents and start to recognise their patterns of play. For example, if their body position is a certain way, or they take a ball with a certain timing, you know what will be the most likely shot to come.

I have played these guys before, so I also take experience into these shot decisions. If, for example, I had to retrieve with a back wall boast, I would try to play to Karim Abdel Gawad's forehand and Mohamed ElShorbagy's backhand. Shot selection and placement depend to some extent on your opponent. This is match play.

Do you write these points and observations down?

Yes I do sometimes, but I don't need to do it so much now.

I suppose you have to ask yourself, 'What is this guy's best shot?' 'Where is he catching me out?' and undertake some analysis...

One hundred per cent. I am very lucky to have people around me who analyse as well. I have [former world No.1] Karim Darwish and my wife Nour [El Tayeb]. They have been at the top of the game, so they understand where a player's weaknesses and strengths are. They can locate where I am losing and where I am winning. They help me to capitalise on my strengths, avoid my weaknesses and focus on an opponents' weaknesses.

Do you construct favourite combinations? For example, do you think, 'If I play this shot, he will have these options and I will be ready for them?'

It is more a pattern of play rather than single shot selection. The pattern of play is different for when I play Mohamed, to when I play Karim, for example. Obviously you have your own game plan that you want to assert on every player you come up against, but at the same time you tweak it for each opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

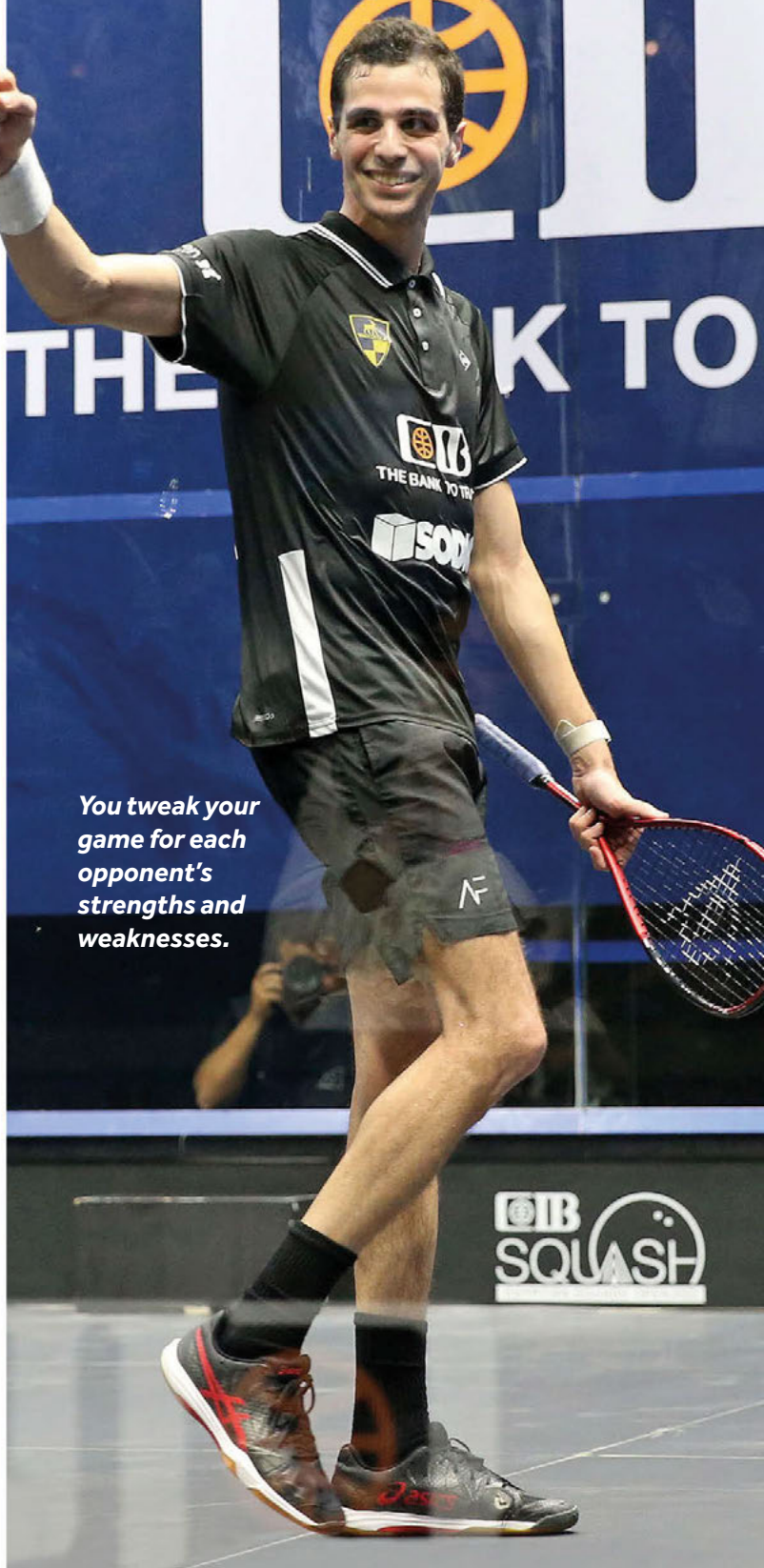
So when I defend, I want to do it in a certain area; when I attack, I want to attack in this area, I want to attack at this time, I want to take the ball early, or I want to hold the ball and then play it. It varies from one player to another.

Against some opponents do you ever deliberately extend the rallies?

Yes. Sometimes I need to hit to the back, but sometimes I can play an all-court game from the start. If I play with someone I know I can deal with in the front court, I will go short from the very beginning and then read their next shots. This frustrates them.

I've seen you play a lot of crosscourts. Is this perhaps because taking the ball earlier makes it harder for opponents to intercept? And is there more risk crosscourting from the back corners?

Yes. When you crosscourt, you try to be in the driving seat. If they are in the back corner, they can't intercept. Obviously sometimes I do crosscourts from the back because my opponent is predicting the straight return. If they play a good straight backhand length, then start to lean towards the left-hand wall to volley my return, I will try to sense that and play a wide crosscourt or even a lob crosscourt.



You tweak your game for each opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

Former world champion Ross Norman had fantastic deep crosscourts, but with modern rackets these may be easier to intercept. Do players now need to go lower or higher and a bit wider?

Exactly. Shoulder height is very dangerous as it is easy for an opponent to volley. It depends on where your opponent is. If your opponent is stuck in the back corner, the height doesn't matter, but if they are in front of you, you should avoid the shoulder-height shot. Either go high and wide or low and wide.

If a crosscourt shot comes out three-quarters of the way down the court, it can be dangerous.

Yes, it depends on the angle and the condition of the ball. If the ball is hot at the beginning and you hit it low and hard, you can get it to the back corner. But obviously the longer the game goes, the softer the ball gets and the harder it is to get it into the back corners.