



The Champion

Ramy Ashour looks back at his British Open victory in May and forward to the defence of his world title later this month in a fascinating interview with Rod Gilmour

“Every life has one true love snapshot” - *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (Mitch Albom)

For a player once described as “a gift from God” by Egypt’s former national coach, Amir Wagih, it is ironic

that Ramy Ashour’s favourite book – Albom’s was a New York Times bestseller in 2003 – has a godlike title.

Ashour’s “snapshot” from one of the book’s quotes comes from his British Open success in May. “It has to be winning match ball,” says the 26-year-old,

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It was a beautiful moment

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who, in doing so, fell to his knees and put his head in his hands. “It will forever live loud and clear in my memory, because it wasn’t only a victory against a great player like Greg Gaultier, but more for me.”

For many players this would be enough to crown a career, but Ashour is no ordinary professional. Even for a player who was headlined by the BBC with a question (the BBC website asked whether Ashour was the ‘world’s greatest racquet-sports player’) during the build-up to the British Open, this unquestionable talent admits to dealing with “hard circumstances” before becoming the first Egyptian winner of the sport’s oldest event since 1966.

“It was a victory against some tough conditions I was facing back home,” he continues. “By winning that tournament I did beat some corrupted, negative souls who wanted to bring me down.

“I thank the Lord for that

victory and I need nothing really more for the next few years or so. But I will keep doing my best to always keep my parents, my country and the people who truly support me proud.”

He won’t elaborate on the “corrupted souls” remark, preferring to reflect on the “victory and the glory” in Hull – and who would deny him that?

With the world no.1 ranking cemented, as well as a record-breaking winning streak of 41 matches up to the start of September, he now heads into the World Championship in Manchester with his rivals wondering how they can break the Egyptian’s stranglehold on the world game.

It won’t get any easier for them in Manchester, a city which should really welcome Ashour with open arms considering his only other regular hunting ground in Britain has been the best-of-three, end-of-season World Series Finals in London.

Home favourite Matthew may be a man on a mission – both he and Ashour will be chasing their third world titles – but Ashour is unbeaten in four tournaments and 20 matches in Manchester, stretching back to 2005.

Ashour returns to the city that launched his rise at the 2008 World Championship, when he became the first player since Jansher Khan to win both junior and senior titles in the same year. “It was a beautiful moment,” Ashour recalls.

The Egyptian looked fresh-faced and raw then. Five years on and that rawness remains, but only in as far as his game is so different from his peers. He still lives in an air-miles induced, crazy world.

Setting up this interview took some patience. I missed him in Buenos Aires as he flew off for an exhibition in Montevideo, Uruguay, in the early hours following squash’s exclusion from the 2020 Olympics. We finally caught up a

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Squash is a hard lifestyle

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few weeks later on a Saturday night in Cairo, via Skype. A city curfew is in place and Ashour is continuing to talk at a thunderous pace as he responds to a question on his daily programme. Just what makes him stand out?

Can defending champion Ramy Ashour hold Nick Matthew’s challenge at bay as both vie for a third world title?

"It's really nothing special," he says. "People think I'm doing something magical. It's not the fitness or routine.

"I will never be more professional than Nick [Matthew] or James [Willstrop], as they have been doing this for their whole lives and it's the way they have been raised. I do most of the normal things: footwork, cardio, weights and strength.



I was a wreck



"I have always given 100 per cent, but I was never that knowledgeable about myself or the way I train, until I started getting injuries."

Ashour first became world no.1 in 2010 before a series of setbacks – he conceded matches in the 2010 and 2011 World Championships – forced him into a rethink and a now career-defining relationship with the Aspire Academy in Qatar. The hamstrings and niggles have all but gone.

"The way I had to learn about conditioning and my body started to become clear," Ashour admits. "I had to start reading, speaking and working with people who knew about these problems.

"When everything came together, I started to become more creative in my squash. There is a strategy which I tailor for myself, something that works for me. I never copied anyone. I tried to find workouts that are best for me. They don't necessarily have to work for other people.

"It's more about individual habits and being open to new ideas, listening to the young and old."

Ashour refers to Jahangir Khan at this point. "It's how to be physically consistent and dedicated over those years. Squash is not a day job, it's a hard lifestyle," he said.

One YouTube clip reflects his thinking on creating new ideas. It features Ashour training at the back of the court with a partner at the front. When he sends a backhand boast to the front, Ashour skips to the T, before quickly simulating the same shot again. By this time the ball is going to the forehand, but there's enough time for him to switch sides and repeat the process.

"I want to show the squash world that you can be creative," says Ashour on his foot movement techniques. "The more you love this game, the more you have to try new things for yourself."

Ashour is also being creative on TV, now that Egypt, in a time of need, has jumped on the feel-good bandwagon. He was inundated with media interview requests when he returned to Cairo after his British Open win, which included singing on a news channel.

"There is more recognition now,"

Ashour says. "There will be more pressure on me winning the World Championship, so I have to be up for the responsibility."

Form should take him to the business end. The last time Ashour failed to reach a PSA final was in December 2011, while last year saw him become the first player since Jansher in the mid-1990s to make the final of every event in which he competed during a calendar year.

It is little wonder that he is being touted as the world's greatest racquet-sports player. "It's brilliant that people say those things," Ashour admits. "I've always been a believer in praise and criticism. I have to enjoy the moment when something great is said about you.

"But I can't think too much about myself, there are too many good players on the Tour. I want to stay where I am mentally and not get caught out by the good words. But, yes, it does give you confidence."

After last year's world title in Qatar, Ashour vowed never to put himself through the rigours of back-to-back tournaments ahead of a major. It is the reason he missed the recent US Open, as he set about contemplating another world crown. Not even the most ardent squash fan could take him to task for skipping that tournament, given the crazy schedules at this time of the year.

"I can't play two tournaments like that



You have to be so strong



again," he says of his wins in Hong Kong and Qatar last November. "Last year, when I did that in Doha, I said to myself 'you are never going to do that again to your body'. I was a wreck."

Even aged 26, this sport can bring

RAMY BACKS MORE MAJOR GIMMICKS

The sight of Ramy Ashour entering the World Championship final in Doha last year on the back of a Harley Davidson was an unusual one.

"It was different," recalled Ashour. "The promoter thought about doing something that grabbed people's attention and the idea was to show the energy we created on the court."

Ashour believes tournaments should introduce these types of gimmicks at every major final.

He added: "It adds to the atmosphere, gets people talking and adds flavour and an edge to the sport."

down the best – and the likes of young pretender Mohamed Elshorbagy, who reached last year's world final, are not making Ashour's path to greater riches any easier. The Egyptians haven't lost their touch since the 2008 event in Manchester either, where seven players made the last 16.

Ashour says: "What could be better than winning the World Championship than where I won it last time? Let me keep my feet on the ground and see how things go, as there are a lot of people who are out to win it."

As for his second stint at no.1 – Matthew relinquished top billing after last year's worlds – Ashour is more grounded this time around.

"It's a great feeling. Who wouldn't want to be up there at the top? There are other struggles that go with it. It is a big responsibility and the more you stay at the top, the more life gets harder around you.

"There is more attention put on you. If you are a celebrity or an actor, it's easy, but for a sportsman or athlete, I don't find it that easy, especially for such a hard game as squash. You have to be so mentally strong."

Head to head

Nick Matthew	V	Ramy Ashour
25 (since Oct 99)	PSA titles won	31 (since Nov 2004)
16	Total months spent at world no.1	19
25 matches	Best winning PSA streak	41 matches
8	Head-to-head	17
\$524,000	Approx career prize money (Figures are combined winner and runner-up purses only on PSA Tour)	\$788,000
P28 W22 L6 (not including National Championships)	Matches played in Manchester	P21 W20 L1

Up until September 2013 (source: Squashinfo.com)