

The Challenger

Rod Gilmour talks to Nick Matthew about his hectic summer off court and his preparations for a tilt at a third world title in Manchester

Over the last five months he's got married, written his autobiography, been inducted into Sheffield's Hall of Fame and had a squash academy to focus on, so when Nick Matthew describes his next target – a third world title tilt at the age of 33 – as “just a game of squash”, has the ultra-competitive Yorkshireman gone soft round the edges?

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Undoubtedly not. It's just that Matthew has found new meaning to his game as he attempts to battle back to the top in his 34th year, his 15th on the PSA Tour.

“It's the one we all want to win,” the British champion said. “But at the end of the day we need to remember it's just a game of squash, to treat it as that and enjoy it.”

Life was treating Matthew well up until last September. After claiming three PSA titles in 2012, he won the British Grand Prix that month, notching up his 50th Tour final appearance and a 25th title in the process.

That's where the fun ended. Yes, there were semi-final and final appearances (including losing his world crown to Ramy Ashour in Qatar), but by the beginning of this year the double world champion was beginning to feel the effects.

He played eight events between January and March, and he has said that by the final two he “just hit a wall” and was “hating” every minute of being on court. Squash seemed periphery.

“I had too much going on,” Matthew

admitted. “I sort of fell off a cliff a little bit and I wasn't enjoying it anymore.”

Matthew took stock. This year he will play four tournaments up until Christmas, including the US Open and the World Championship, but 2014 looks set to be quieter.

“You start to realise once you get into your 30s that there are not too many more of these chances left,” Matthew said of his world title aspirations. “They get fewer and fewer. It makes you think of their importance, so I try to turn it into an excitement over pressuring yourself.

“The fact that I still want to do well is a good sign. If I lost in the first round of all these events, I would still have a great career – nothing will change that.

“I need to go in with the mentality of nothing to lose and everything to gain. Last year I was putting far too much pressure on myself to live up to my expectations every time I went on court.”

Manchester will be the first time that the sport's major has been held in Britain since 2008, when it took place at the same venue. This time the latter stages will be held at Manchester Central, a bigger venue in the city. There, Matthew is seeded to meet Ashour, Egypt's multi-faceted man-of-the-moment, in the semi-finals.

Matthew will be more than eager to atone for last year's defeat in Qatar against Ashour at the same stage, when he was attempting to win a hat-trick of world titles.

“My preparation had been good,” Matthew recalled. “It was the one I had

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prepared for. Everyone went in on good form and Ramy proved he was the best player all round.

“I hung in there and did the best I could [before losing in four games]. I was always trying to stay in the match without ever trying to win it. It was the tournament I had built up to, but I can say it was one of my better performances.”

Matthew's last defeat to Ashour came

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at the World Team Championship during the summer, so with Ashour skipping the US Open, it will be intriguing to see how the Egyptian fares in his bid to retain the world title.

“It's clear to see that he has been working on fitness as well as his diet,” Matthew said. “I don't know what he's doing and rightly so. I'm sure he's not too worried judging by my form at the end of last season. You can't pay too much attention to what anyone else is doing.”

Matthew admits that he had “a bit of a setback” against Ashour and Gregory Gaultier last season, and says he is looking forward to seeing an improvement in his performances against the world's top two.

“I have worked on several technical areas which I am really excited about,” said the Yorkshireman. “It's great to still keep things fresh and bring new ideas into my game.”

Since that defeat at the World Team Championship in Mulhouse, Ashour has been gallivanting across the globe, presenting at squash's Olympic bid in Buenos Aires and playing to enthusiastic crowds at several exhibitions in South America. Matthew, meanwhile, trod a different path this summer, marrying his partner Esme, a physiologist at British Cycling.

“It has been good for the soul and has given me a boost,” Matthew said. “I gave myself a bit more time to prepare myself for the season. I wanted to enjoy marriage and honeymoon. I didn't want to come back from that enjoyment phase and everyone being a yard sharper than me.”

If Matthew had reason to be stuck behind his rivals, blame Sheffield City Council. Last month he was imprinted in



BOOK RELEASE

Nick Matthew will release his autobiography 'Sweating Blood: My Life In Squash' during the AJ Bell World Championship in Manchester.

Priced at £10, the book will delve behind the scenes at his British, world and Commonwealth triumphs. It will include themes such as prize money, his career-threatening injuries, training, the PSA Tour's craziest players, plus his sometimes fractious relationship with James Willstrop.

“It has been time-consuming but fun,” he said. “Hopefully, this will not be just focused on squash players. There are a few stories to be told in there.”

The book follows on from Willstrop's own account of life on tour, which was published in 2012.

history when his name was etched on the city's Walk of Fame, alongside the likes of Olympian Jessica Ennis and comedian Michael Palin.

"It is lovely to be recognised, but I am still desperate for more success," he

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admitted. "I have to go about it in the right way and not put pressure on myself. I've been lucky that a few nice things have happened to me and that has felt good. I've had a great summer, but I'm aware that a season has ups and downs."

Matthew is now "chomping at the bit" to get back to the day job, but his World Championship preparations will depend on how he fares at the US Open. What is certain, however, is that his home club in

Sheffield - the Hallamshire, an hour from Manchester - could play a key part.

"I love going there," he said. "When I do get time, it is like I am touching base. It feels like I am playing my best when I get a period of time there."

The lead-up to Manchester will no doubt be a hive of activity, too, with Matthew and compatriot James Willstrop the centre of British squash fans' attention. Such is his experience, Matthew will no doubt take it in his stride, perhaps part of that "just a game" mentality he has now instilled into his mindset.

"If I feel like I need a couple of matches, I will arrange that," Matthew added of his preparations. "I will do some sessions with my coach, but they will be shorter without it being a long, drawn-out training day.

"You always try and react to what's happened in the season before and how to improve your game. I feel like I have had a positive summer. My game is definitely in a great place."

Yoga – a 'drug' Matthew can't shake off

Nick Matthew has found a new spring in his step thanks to yoga and believes that by taking a leaf out of footballer Ryan Giggs' book (who is approaching 40) it will give him longevity in the sport.

"It keeps me loose," says Matthew. "I have put it into my programme, using it four days per week first thing in the morning."

Matthew's insistence on using the practice for 20 minutes has left him craving yoga on the days he misses out on it.

He admits: "It is like a drug for me. The more you do it, the more you feel you need to do it. It is a nightmare in some senses."

Matthew began to use yoga after Jade Leeder, the England squash physio, started to incorporate it at the end of national squad sessions.

Having admitted he never went near yoga a few years ago, Matthew is now aware of the wear and tear on his hips, as well as problems on his gluteal muscles (buttocks), through twisting and lunging.

Leeder stresses that players like Matthew need to have a good deal of

flexibility. "But it's vital to have the muscle strength to control it. Otherwise, they are at greater risk of injury," she adds.

"We also use it to assist circulation, to clear away toxins accumulated in tough sessions and for relaxation."

Yoga, she says, can be done daily, but for the England players it's time-dependent. "We do use it a lot after long flights to gently reactivate tired or tight muscles and promote the blood flow," she admits.

So, is yoga easy to practise? "There are a lot of types of yoga and it's personal preference as to the style," she says. "Squash players tend to find the hip and spine-based exercises helpful and most beneficial.

"It's a fantastic way of relaxing and rejuvenating your body at the same time. It takes minimal equipment and can be done anywhere."



Nick Matthew, trying to return to the top in his 34th year