

Showdown in Manchester

Any of six players can win the world title, according to Ian McKenzie

AJ BELL WORLD SQUASH CHAMPIONSHIP

Dates:

October 26 to November 3

Website:

AJBellWorldSquashChamps.co.uk

Venues:

National Squash Centre

(qualifying to 3rd round),

Manchester Central

(quarter-finals onwards)

TV:

BBC red button, psasquashtv.com



Manchester Central, venue for the latter stages of the World Championship

British Open champion Ramy Ashour is a shoo-in to retain his world title... isn't he? Well, not quite!

Let's go back just a year when Ashour disposed of Gregory Gaultier and Nick Matthew to reach the world final in Qatar but alarmingly stood at 8-7 in the fifth – when it was anyone's match, anyone's title – to rank outsider Mohamed Elshorbagy.

Let's also go back to just a few weeks ago when Ashour stood 2/1 down to world no.2 Gaultier in San Francisco's NetSuite Open.

The Egyptian is a brilliant player but one who plays by fine margins: if the momentum is disrupted, if his free spirit is restrained or imprisoned, if self-doubt starts to overwhelm his exuberant confidence, if niggling injury worries balloon into catastrophic fears or if he just doesn't get himself organised, well anything can happen – that's the problem with fine margins.

It may be fair to say the title is in Ashour's hands to win or lose, but that is a bit of an overstatement. There is resolute competition for this title. Six competitors have the ability to win it: Ashour, Gaultier, Matthew, James Willstrop, Amr Shabana and Elshorbagy. But the belief surges more through some than others. Outside of these it is hard to see a new champion emerging, but then who would have put a riyal on Elshorbagy in Qatar last year?

Daryl Selby has taken out Matthew at the British National Championships and Peter Barker has overcome him in the Canary Wharf Classic, while Tarek Momen's attacking game could ambush anyone (as Matthew experienced in Qatar), but in Manchester the top eight seeds should largely go through unhindered. Major upsets are a rarity in the men's game nowadays.

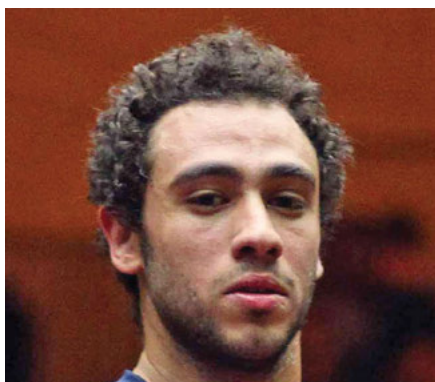
Karim Darwish, the no.5 seed, may be

aggrieved that he does not feature among my leading contenders, but, good as he is, there is no evidence that he can mount a consistent threat to the top players.

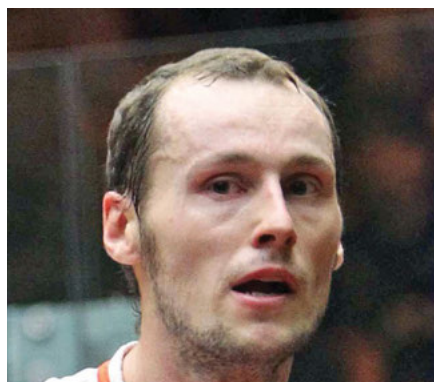
You could say the same of Shabana, but it is hard to argue against giving long odds to a player who has four world titles – as many as the other 63 players in the main draw put together.

Status, history, form, preparation, belief, luck and, of course, the draw will all play a part in deciding the title in Manchester. I include history because defending champion Ashour and Matthew both have two world titles to their name, and they are not easy to come by. If one of these two triumphs, they will join an elite club of those who have won three or more world crowns: Geoff Hunt, Jahangir Khan, Jansher Khan and Shabana.

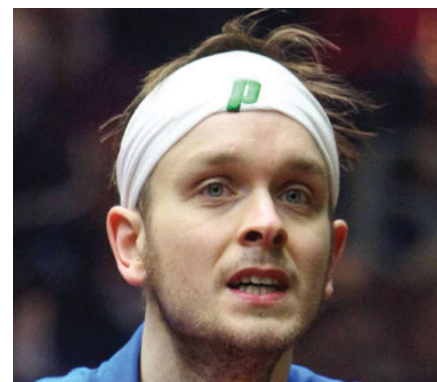
Matthew will give his left arm to join that club and has little time left to do so. Shabana has even less time to win



Ramy Ashour Seed: 1 Age: 26 Record: two world titles



Gregory Gaultier Seed: 2 Age: 30 Record: three world finals



James Willstrop Seed: 3 Age: 30 Record: one world final



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another world title, but what a way to go out (Jonathon Power, you may remember, chose to retire when he regained his world no.1 status). Time may not be so kind to Willstrop either.

So this World Championship is a shoot-out. The top contenders are not going to be around for ever. Check out their ages.

Ramy Ashour has matured as a player and understands more what is required to win. He won his first title way back in 2008 in Manchester as a 21-year-old. 'New World Order' said the Squash Player magazine headline at the time. It wasn't really. Shabana, whom he beat in the semi-finals on the athletics track next to the National Squash Centre, came back for another title, Nick Matthew for two. After regaining the title in Qatar last year, it is almost a second coming for Ashour. It is nice to have brilliance, but he now has the back-up from the Aspire Academy in Qatar that has been an important influence in transforming a career blighted by injuries. He has learnt to manage persistent injuries more expertly. The 26-year-old understands his body better now and the preparation required. Whether he understands his mind better may be an equally pertinent question, but if everything is right to let the talent flow, it may not matter. He did not play in the US Open, a tournament he really likes, in order to be ready and fresh for Manchester. Preparation is on the agenda now, which it wasn't for the British Open at the O2 in 2012, when he was reputedly still in bed when most players would have been courside warming up. Matthew got the jump on him then. Discipline and order do not suit Ashour's persona, but he is making efforts. Laurens Jan Anjema is a tough first round for him, Cameron Pilley, his

likely opponent in the last 16, can threaten anyone for a while, as can potential quarter-final opponent Peter Barker, but overall he will be happy with his draw, with either Matthew or Shabana a potential semi-final opponent.

Amr Shabana is now 34 years old. In an illustrious career he has failed to win the British Open or really perform in England except in the non-ranking World Series Finals at the Queen's Club in London. In the 2012 Finals he beat Gregory Gaultier (in 91 minutes) in the final and in 2013 Nick Matthew in 57 minutes. We could ask them if he is over the hill. Matthew took his revenge later in the month at the TOC in New York – as did Gaultier, but I don't think Matthew will be taking him lightly if they both reach the quarter-finals (as they should).

Nick Matthew is 33 years old now and ready for this. He has had a long break since helping win the World Team Championship for England in June. He will be fit, keen and fresh, but he may not have the background of matches he needs behind him. His only competitive outing since June was for Black and White Worms at the European Club Championships in Riccione, in which he beat James Willstrop – as he does – in the final.

James Willstrop, the former world no.1 now 30, needs a title. He has an interesting second-round clash with Tom Richards and is seeded to meet no.6 seed Mohamed Elshorbagy in the quarters. Elshorbagy is 22, hits the ball like a rocket, is fast and will have his 6ft 4in opponent lunging and twisting at speed. Willstrop's beautiful hands will caress the ball into clinging lines and gentle curves to take the pace off it. Take your pick.

Mohamed Elshorbagy – what of him? What has happened to the potent

threat he posed in Qatar, after which he seemed set to surge to world no.2 and threaten the world's greatest racket-sports exponent with a pace that made Novak Djokovic look pedestrian? Elshorbagy has the power of Hiddy Jahan and the speed of his brother Zarak, but there have been no titles since Qatar – just two PSA Tour finals, where he lost to Karim Darwish and Gregory Gaultier. Still, we know what the Bristol-based student is capable of.

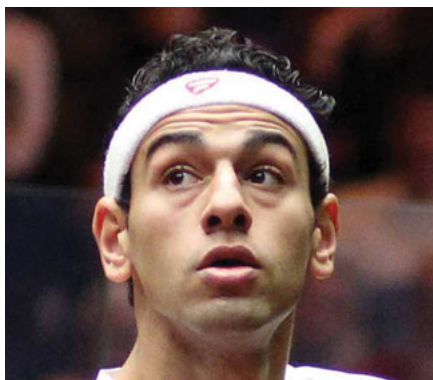
Gregory Gaultier is seeded to make the final and he has been there before three times – in Cairo, Bermuda and Rotterdam. With a second wind to his career, he has regained the world no.2 status and, behind Ashour, is the rightful heir to Jonathon Power and Amr Shabana. But can he live up to his own expectations? That's the problem. The capability is there with his fierce pace, dynamic extraction from the shot and lightning counters that give his opponents so little time.

However, will he throw games when he falls behind and lose momentum, will the fear of the loss of the world crown to David Palmer in Cairo in 2006 and the recurring nightmare of conceding five match points flicker through his mind when the crown is at last within his grasp and paralyse him in his moment of triumph? It is all down to the mental battle with Gaultier and that battle is with himself.

What is your guess? Could one of the four over-30 players win, could the junior suddenly come good or will the 26-year-old reach a brilliant peak and show us what he is capable of? Home crowds will be rooting for Matthew and Willstrop, and possibly Ashour too, for he won in Manchester last time the event was held there. Wish you were there?



Nick Matthew Seed: 4 Age: 33 Record: two world titles



Mohamed Elshorbagy Seed: 6 Age: 22 Record: one world final



Amr Shabana Seed: 8 Age: 34 Record: four world titles



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