

Wallbangers: The Squash Road Movie

With Egyptians – and Ramy Ashour in particular – expected to dominate the forthcoming Men's World Championship in Manchester, Rod Gilmour talks to Omar S. Khodeir about *Wallbangers*, the riveting documentary he is making about the troubled country's squash scene

Four-time world champion Amr Shabana is in his car negotiating the Cairo traffic, talking on camera to a film-maker. In a rare moment away from the glare of the glass court, his hands are draped over the steering wheel as he says: "I don't keep runners-up cups. For me, reaching the final and losing is much worse than losing in the first round."

Shabana is one of the main characters in a soon-to-be-completed documentary on Egyptian squash entitled '*Wallbangers*'. It is the work of Omar S. Khodeir, who has followed the sport's powerhouse over the last two years for a revealing behind-the-scenes film.

Set against the backdrop of Egypt's revolution and its political upheavals, the film outlines the mental state of the players as they deal with the stresses of home life amid a country in turmoil. As Khodeir says, this won't be a yarn about players' injuries.

Wallbangers is also a story of courage and redemption, a personal exploration of Egypt's deep roots in squash since the 1930s and a reflection on the future of the game.

"If we're talking film genres, it will be like a road movie," Khodeir told me. "It will be a journey and how they are constantly battling with their own demons. I'm inspired by these films."

Over the months he has slowly built up a relationship with the top players. He has travelled across the globe, covering World Championships and British Opens. If the players feel he is being intrusive, they can tell him to "buzz off".

"I've been doing intensive interviews amidst the current wave of the revolution," Khodeir said. "We are working around the curfew too."

In a 'road' movie such as this Khodeir says there are always new discoveries.

"It's the redemption thing," he says. "You see it always with the players when they challenge themselves. Each has their own quirk and sense of achievement."

Despite the Egyptians' current domination, he claims they don't get one iota of support. It is all down to personal effort.

"I'm observing from the outside and what I'm seeing is pretty sad," he says. "They need to get the support from the Egyptian federation, which they're not getting. At the end of the day it begs the question: why should you play for your national team?"

These political problems clearly bring the players closer together. It is why we see players coaching each other during tournaments. There is trust, but also respect from the younger players. Even Ramy Ashour, now the sport's best player, gets in on the act. During one scene he is talking rapidly into his phone and we overhear him say: "It is what Shabana taught us."

Khodeir laments how the sport is regarded in Egypt. However, he admits that the conditions most of the players train under also yield their results, which are pivotal to the film.

"I see corruption," he says. "You hear news that five glass courts are being built, but where are they? It is disastrous really. But I guess the life and stress of living in Egypt feed into their game."

The film also touches on former President Hosni Mubarak's love of the sport. "I'm always looking politically at what was happening at the time of the revolution," Khodeir says.

"To have other stories that cross over into their lives creates a deeper layer. With all the big tournaments, there was also a parallel with the revolution and what was emerging in Tahrir Square."



Khodeir lines up a subject for his *Wallbangers* movie

In the mad world of Egyptian squash, the near 'access all areas' pass should portray a riveting film. However, Egypt's sensitivity to the camera was still prominent at the National Championships.

This event always seemed a perilous place to be, given the rivalry between parents and the adrenalin from the players as they bid to outdo each other, so footage would have been natural. Overzealous security at the club door put paid to that. "They saw the camera as a negative tool," Khodeir says.

Still, Khodeir has months of film in the bank, which will come to fruition in early December, when *Wallbangers* goes into post-production after the Men's World Championship in Manchester. "I'm planning to have it ready for screenings and the festival circuit in early December," he said.

By hook or by crook, Khodeir is hopeful that he will be able to raise the \$35,000 needed (largely through crowd funding) to finish and promote the film, which is 80 per cent English, 20 per cent Arabic (with subtitles) to reach a broader market.

If the movie is anything like how Khodeir describes a player travelling to training, then we are in for a cracking portrayal of the sport. "You are always alert, always on the edge here," he says. "By the time you drive to the club, there are hundreds of things you have to deal with."

• To view clips of *Wallbangers*, go to: www.wallbangersmovie.com. For information on funding and production go to: www.indiegogo.com/wallbangers



Omar S. Khodeir films Raneem El Weleily giving a pep talk to boyfriend Tarek Momen at the Allam British Open