

# Yarv breaks the mould

Yawar 'Yarv' Abbas, the British National over-45 champion, is the man overseeing the forthcoming men's World Championship in Manchester. Richard Eaton finds out his plans for the biggest squash event to take place in the UK

The most widely-publicised tournament in the 80 years Britain has been staging international squash is about to begin. New deals, new media, reduced costs and increasing ambition should make the return of the World Championship to Manchester a ground-breaker.

It is ideal, therefore, that the man overseeing it is not only a skilled and experienced operator, but also a high-level squash player. In addition, he was a member of the team who organised the World Championship when it came to Manchester five years ago.

Then Yawar 'Yarv' Abbas was an event manager for Manchester City Council. He has since risen to become its principal events manager. Though this means he has to spend more time looking after other sports, it's clear from listening to him for only a moment that his feelings haven't moved elsewhere as well.

Yarv represented England as a junior; more than a quarter of a century later he is

now British National over-45 champion. In the years in between he was Durham and Cleveland champion a record 10 times.

Yarv is one of us. A warm-hearted, well-grounded Teessider, he still enthuses about the pioneering of Jonah Barrington, admires the ground-breaking skill and charisma of Ramy Ashour, and revels in the greater enterprise with which the modern game is played.

"I still love the sport very much and I know more than I did last time," he says, immediately turning his attention to the very different emotional context of the World Championship this time.

"We are determined to show the IOC what they are missing," he went on, referring to the incongruous U-turn with which they reinstated wrestling into the Olympic programme a mere seven months after it had been ejected.

"I really hope the IOC have at least seen what we are capable of and how we have positioned ourselves. It's another four years and another generation of athletes gone. It's a real shame.

"But we can make an answer with this World Championship and we have the BBC to help us. It really feels that we have a global future here."

He is referring not only to the sport's partnership with one of the globe's prestigious media corporations, but to the huge advances, technological and financial, which give squash so much more potential than five years ago.

The emphasis in 2008 was on staging an event which might achieve rapport with a North-West English audience. Now the vision has expanded from seeking provincial acclaim to utilising a global multi-media market.

Back then his focus was mostly upon operations; now his remit is much more about strategy. Then he worked within a team; now he is leading it.

So it is with authority that Yarv speaks when he asserts that a worldwide show is being created this time, not just regional theatre. In five years significant advances have taken place in broadcasting, with HD further enhancing a squash ball's visibility, and in the World Championship organisation's vision.

"Then we were focussing on a spectacle for 1,400 people," Yarv said. "Now we are thinking about how it will look for TV audiences. We will be communicating globally rather than just with an audience in the arena. It's a huge difference.

"Last time we thought about television and the camera positions only after we had made the seating plan and sold the tickets.

This time we looked for the best places for the cameras first. We are approaching it to make a television programme, as well as a show for spectators.

"In the early days of the British Open's television coverage, the cost of a camera which could sweep across an audience was really expensive. Now it's affordable for sports – I hesitate to say it, for minority sports. It's not costing the world.

"We will have a TV presenter in the tunnel now, whereas before we had a fixed position behind the court. The BBC is keen to have the feel of presenting a programme right inside the auditorium. We can be flexible and we have been looking at imaginative positions around the arena."

There was relish in his voice. He would enjoy doing good things for squash, of course, but you wondered if doing them differently might please him more. It was a reminder of his answer to my question about his greatest interest outside sport.

"Music," he replied. "From Beatles to the Stones, Hendrix, Led Zep, Smiths, Stone Roses, Public Enemy, Massive Attack, Arcade Fire – anyone who broke the mould," he replied. He might revel in breaking it for squash.

It remains to be seen on which of its platforms the BBC will project the action. In the aftermath of the Olympic near miss an updated value still has yet to be placed on a world squash championship.

Whatever the assessment, the final will be available on the BBC's red button and the semi-finals may be. It is expected that BBC2 will do a highlights show. Coverage should appear on BBC iPlayer and be live-streamed on the biggest sports website in western Europe.

"They are not going to place it straightaway on BBC1," Yarv acknowledges. "It is difficult getting trust, because Sky are having it anyway. But what we have outweighs anything on pay-per-view.

"It's also a matter of trying to sell a sport which doesn't have a reputation of being great on television. But this is a good package I think and good exposure.

"The main thing is that the BBC are covering the event. It has a badge of quality which is recognised worldwide. Now there is an opportunity for the sport and for Manchester to get some good profile."

So what of the arena which will frame that profile? The National Squash Centre, which was used throughout the last World Championship, will hold only the first, second and third rounds this time.

From the quarter-finals onwards the



Yawar Abbas on the way to becoming British National over-45 champion

tournament moves to Manchester Central, formerly known as the G-Mex, a conference venue slap-bang in the middle of the city.

More exactly, it will be staged in the Exchange Hall, which is not Manchester Central's main hall but will house 1,500 spectators with a tight fit. That should create intimacy, which is important for staging modern professional squash, especially if feet and faces can be brought close to the glass walls.

Inside the building will be an exhibition village and immediately outside are the city streets, with restaurants and bars, and people and bustle. Grabbing some food, going for a drink or getting a change of scenery will only require a short stroll.

The champion has a revamped image as well. Since winning his first world title in Manchester, Ashour has become the modern era's most charismatic player. His public profile has never been better recognised or his highly expressive personality more liked.

Challenging him should be two unusual men whose world-beating exploits since 2008 have been launched from nearby – the two Yorkshiremen, Nick Matthew and James Willstrop. Another front-runner is one of the finest players never to win the world title, Frenchman Greg Gaultier. These and other great



Yawar 'Yarv' Abbas

players arguably provide a better spectacle than in any previous era of the sport.

"If you look at clips on YouTube of squash, you can see the speed of the game has changed," agrees Yarv. "It is so much more dynamic."

"Glass courts are slower and reward attacking play. The technology of the rackets, the focus on training, and the strength and the power of the athletes – all these mean that players attack in a way they didn't in the past. Squash is much more attractive."

But Ashour's magnetism goes further. A charismatic superstar from Cairo in

times when Egypt is struggling for its very future carries a sharper, darker and more urgent appeal.

His exceptional triumph is to have raised himself above one of the planet's great tragedies, whilst still experiencing it very personally. It creates within him a very special desire to make this World Championship a new sensation.

There is only one obvious disappointment in the projection of the 2013 tournament compared with its 2008 version – the absence of a women's event.

It seems a mystery how this happened, as significant funding was apparently given to this World Championship because of its proximity to next year's Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. There, of course, gender equality will be part of the very fabric.

Is the women's absence related to ticket sales? Although much of the cost of staging the tournament, which is said to be about £750,000, will be met by public partners (Manchester City Council, UK Sport, and England Squash), a chunk still needs to come from selling tickets.

They have been going well, according to Yarv. "We have taken around £65,000 in ticket sales already," he estimated a full month and a half before the Championship is due to begin. "I'm hoping we will get to a six-figure sum. I'm really optimistic."