

Heat is on David

Richard Eaton previews the women's World Open in the Cayman Islands from December 13 to 21

THE LOWDOWN

The Cayman Islands Squash Association has been preparing to host the World Open ever since its inaugural open tournament in 2009 was described as "the best debut tournament ever" by Andrew Shelley, then the WSA's tournament director. It's estimated the event, which is offering a record \$165,000 prize fund, will attract 600 sports tourism visitors and bring in tens of millions of dollars.

COURT WATCH

The McWil glass court, which featured in Grand Central terminal for the Tournament of Champions in New York in January, will now stand alongside the palm trees at Camana Bay on Grand Cayman, which has been ranked in the world's 10 most beautiful beaches. Evening temperatures should be in the high 70s, so conditions may be humid and tough. Protected by a wide roof, the court should not be vulnerable to the elements, though.

OPEN IN NUMBERS

- 4** – different nations who have had a women's world champion matchpoints Sarah Fitz-Gerald saved against Michelle Martin in the greatest final, at Stuttgart in 1998
- 78** – points played in that final, which is also the longest to date
- 38** – Heather McKay's age when winning the second of her two titles, making her the oldest champion
- 21** – Susan Devoy's age when winning the first of her four titles, making her the youngest champion
- 12** – times Australians have won the World Open, in 28 attempts

STAT ATTACK

Since Nicol David surprisingly became world champion in 2005, the light-footed Malaysian has scampered to a record six World Open titles, four of them in a row (also a record), to a record eight Asian titles, to a record 63 WSA Tour titles, and held the world no.1 ranking for six years and seven months.

HOW TO WATCH

The semi-finals and final are to be televised, while the quarters onwards will be streamed. SquashTV, the UK-based television crew, will provide coverage live to "numerous international markets," according to a tournament spokesperson,

and then telecast a two-hour highlights package. Coverage will also appear live online at SquashTV.com and ESPN3.com.

WHAT WE WILL/WON'T SEE

Won't see: Rain stops play.
Will see: Friendly stingrays.

THE CHAMPION



Nicol David's unique status meant that two recent defeats caused a disproportionate reaction, her loss in the Malaysian Open final to Raneem El Weleily leading to one of

the all-time daftest headlines.

"Show us you can," one KL publication blathered. Requesting that of a player who has dominated women's squash like no other during the professional era is like asking Usain Bolt to show us he can run.

Later the same organ spouted that David "simply cannot get it right in the United States", after she lost to Alison Waters at the Carol Weymuller Open. It confirmed that David must always win to avoid criticism.

This is a relentless, destructive pressure. Add the fact that the competition is improving and more diffuse, and glitches are inevitable.

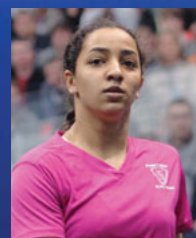
David acknowledges she has to work harder mentally and physically to stay on top. This makes peaking more important. If she works to full capacity and tries her utmost always, she will fail.

In sports where the strength in depth is greater, the best players focus on major events. At other tournaments they may have mixed motives. In her 30th year David increasingly has to do likewise. Sure enough, she won the U.S. Open, the biggest title to have eluded her, overcoming both Waters and El Weleily.

Reportedly, David remains uninjured, and as fit and motivated as ever. Her losses were caused by other factors, an important one of which was stress. The presence of psychologist Frank Cabooter and coach Liz Irving in Cayman will be important.

Despite this, David's last two World Open final performances have been the best of her career. She may well continue in that vein, even if the list of challengers is lengthening.

THE CHALLENGERS



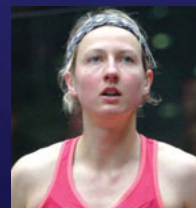
Raneem El Weleily

Returned to world no.2 after beating David in the Malaysian Open final and is the nearest to being a genuine threat. Aged 23, her self-belief is growing.



Laura Massaro

Won the Carol Weymuller Open, briefly reached a career-high world no.2 and beat David twice last year. She might manage an ambush.



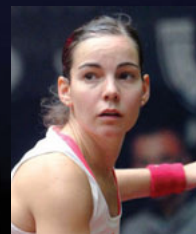
Alison Waters

Has made a wonderful recovery after a year-long injury, beating David at the Carol Weymuller Open and rising from 40 to four this year.



Joelle King

Rose to a career-high five after winning the Macau Open. With recent successes over Waters and Duncalf, and a five-game tussle with David at the U.S. Open, she could climb further.



Jenny Duncalf

Has had a disappointing year since reaching the 2011 final. But two years ago she beat David twice and her experience may help her do well again.



Nour El Sherbini

Touted as David's successor after reaching the British Open final. She has not repeated that form. Though a long-term threat, she is not an in-form challenger.