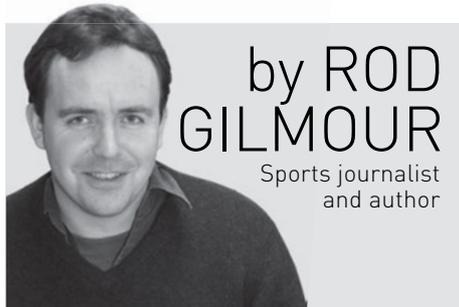


# SQUASH ANNUAL AWARDS

PLAYER



by ROD GILMOUR  
Sports journalist and author

*Squash Player magazine reveals its roll of honour for achievements in 2017, as well as looking back at the year's highlights*

## PLAYER OF THE YEAR

It was **Mohamed ElShorbagy's** change of direction, a flight to the USA and the addition of David Palmer as coach outside of his Bristol base which ultimately inflicted the most damage on his rivals in 2017. After winning the World Series title in June, he collected five further trophies after a rampant run of form which included winning 20 PSA Tour matches in a row to end the year. Gone were the uncertainties and fears in his game. They were replaced instead by a surge back to world no.2 and beating his brother, Marwan, in December's World Championship final. Our other winner fell just short in Manchester, but ever since she became world no.1 aged 20 in May 2016, **Nour El Sherbini's** dominance has been almost undisputed. She nearly won two world titles in one calendar year in



Mohamed ElShorbagy



Nour El Sherbini

2017, claiming the April edition before finishing runner-up in Manchester to end another fine year on the PSA Tour. In the 10 events she played, she won four times, with three runner-up positions. Her shot-making remains electric, her backhand is a seismic weapon and her temperament

suggests she has the game to remain at the top for years to come. Spare a thought too for Egypt's Ali Farag and world champion Raneem El Welily, who in another year would have scooped our prizes after contesting 12 finals between them in 2017.

## YOUNG PLAYERS OF THE YEAR

It would be remiss of us not to mention Peru's ever rising star, Diego Elias, as he continues to make inroads (aged 21, he is now a top 10 player and the youngest in the top 40). But the sport continues to be blessed by equally exuberant youthfulness. Malaysia's **Eain Yow Ng** started 2018 as the youngest player (19) in the top 50 after a consistent year. Singles and doubles successes at the South East Asian Games were crowned either side by PSA Tour wins at the Australian and NT Opens. Then came a brilliant performance for Malaysia as they beat Asian rivals India at the World Team Championships.

There was equal success for Egyptian starlet **Rowan Reda Araby**, who rose 50 places in 2017 to also cement her place in the top 50. The 17-year-old Alexandrian's highlight was undoubtedly toppling top-seeded compatriot Hania El Hammamy to win the world junior title in July, her April wins at the Charlottesville and Richmond Opens in the USA as a 16-year-old setting the tone.



Eain Yow Ng



Rowan Reda Araby

## SURPRISE OF THE YEAR

Take a look at the first round or last 16 draws in the top events these days and in some cases it is a herculean task to pick a winner. Such is the strength of the PSA Tour, picking out 'surprises' was a tall order. To start the year, we had James Willstrop's second-round win over Nick Matthew at the Tournament of Champions, his first PSA win in 10 years and 19 matches against his old rival. In the mix also were Leo Au's fine win on his home court over Ramy Ashour in the Hong Kong Open first round and compatriot Joey Chan's 3-2 win over Nicol David in the World Games semi-finals. But perhaps the biggest shock came at January's Motor City Open, when unseeded Mexican **Cesar Salazar** beat top seed Mohamed ElShorbagy in the first round. The win set up Salazar's entry into the top 20 for the first time.



Cesar Salazar

## MOST IMPROVED PLAYER OF THE YEAR



Satomi Watanabe

On the men's side, India's Ramit Tandon started 2017 as world no.188, dropped to 441 in February, before starting 2018 as world no.80 after two PSA Tour wins. Top Japanese female **Satomi Watanabe's** ranking year wasn't quite as dramatic (139 to world no.67) but given that she progressed through 2017 as an 18-year-old, the plaudits must go to the Yokohama resident as she starts her senior career. In July she became the first Japanese man or woman to reach the quarter-finals of a world junior event, either side of under-19 titles at the Asian, Hong Kong and Penang Junior Opens.



Ali Farag & Nour El Tayeb

## HIGHLIGHT OF THE YEAR

Who knows what the squash climate will look like if Olympic status is realised. For now, the sport remains raw and untouched, and without a raft of new faces trying to make money from new-found Olympic opportunities. At any rate, Paris being awarded the 2024 Games was still a positive sign that squash could finally achieve its objective. The British Junior Open being given a new lease of life in Birmingham for the next three years was also a blessing, as was seeing Iraq entering the men's World Team Championship for the first time, not to mention a welcome return for the Pakistan Open to the PSA Tour calendar. Of course, Egypt was to play a major part in the highlights reel too. Marwan ElShorbagy's head dropping into his brother Mohamed's shoulders after beating him at the Windy City Open in March was simply unforgettable. Yet even that was trumped by another piece of family emotion when **Ali Farag and Nour El Tayeb** won the U.S. Open finals, becoming the first husband and wife to win titles on the same day - in any sport.

## COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

England no. 1 Laura Massaro loves coming back from adversity and the 34-year-old remains five years older than any one of her rivals in the world's top six. Her win over Nour El Sherbini in the British Open semi-finals - the only World Series event of the year which saw no Egyptians in the finals - avenged her 2016 World Championship final defeat, coming from two games down after 20 minutes to beat Egypt's youngest world champion and then go on to lift the iconic British title. A comeback, of course, has two meanings and it is **Lisa Aitken's** story which just shades this category. In 2014 the Scot contracted dengue fever after a mosquito bite at the Malaysian Open and remained off court for three years. Returning as the world no.202 in January, the 27-year-old southpaw then picked up a small niggler, but summoned strength in numbers to return in a Scotland shirt at the European Championships, win two PSA Tour titles and end the year as world no.60. Some comeback.



Lisa Aitken



Karim Abdel Gawad, Ramy Ashour, Ali Farag & Marwan ElShorbagy

## TEAM OF THE YEAR

Was there any other nation in the running? **Egypt** plundered all before them after expected wins at the women's world junior and men's world team events. The Egyptians also prospered individually on the men's and women's world tours to

such a degree that we might as well make this award a collective category. Looking at events with \$100,000 prize money or over, there were 16 PSA Tour titles shared by Egyptians in 18 men's and women's events, with 18 players also making the finals. An utterly dominant year.