

There, the marquee tent rattled with the wind and the venue was bare, white and largely soulless. Dubai, though, was a perfect setting.

It was too for 33-year-old Gaultier, who believes he still has several years of top-level squash left in him. He was a class apart in Dubai. In the past, he might admit to having played too many tournaments in any one season, but his enforced two-month break at the start of the year due to an ankle injury aided him here. With his family in tow, Gaultier looked refreshed, relaxed and happy to put his arm around any one of his opponents, as is his wont.

The Frenchman was up for the fight and even poured cold water on the idea of introducing shortened-format, best-of-three matches during regular World Series events.

“ I like the marathon battles.” Gregory Gaultier

He lost just one game in the group stages, blitzing past Simon Rösner, Cameron Pilley and Omar Mosaad. If there was an end-of-term feel to proceedings to some of the matches, it meant little to Gaultier, who was clearly still in revision mode.

Meanwhile, Mohamed Elshorbagy, the world no.1, was in need of a holiday. The season was catching up on the Egyptian, after winning six World Series events and playing the most matches of all the 16 players in Dubai. It was no surprise that he wasn't a finalist against Gaultier, though Pilley, the lowest-ranked player (at 13) in Dubai, was a welcome one.

Aiming to become the first Australian since Anthony Ricketts in 2006 to lift the title, it was Gaultier who thwarted Pilley's bid as the brilliant Frenchman added to his back-to-back victories in 2008 and 2009.

Like Elshorbagy, world women's champion and world no.1 Nour El Sherbini looked short of her best, so Raneem El Welily emerged as Massaro's opponent in the female final.

Massaro became the first British player since Peter Nicol in 2001 to win the title, because she wanted it more. "Squash players go through so much pain and suffering, but I told myself at the end of the fourth that it was now one final game in the season," said the 32-year-old world no.2 after her five-game win, which made her \$45,000 richer.

Pilley's superb run to the final should make the top 20 across the men's and women's rankings sit up and take notice that a place



Laura Massaro strides to the front of the court on her way to beating Raneem El Welily in the Dubai World Series Finals decider

in the year-end Finals is worth fighting for. There is a new meaning to the event and players should rightly structure their season to make reaching the top-eight tournament a priority.

With the promotional images and television pictures offering a glamorous feel to proceedings – players were handsomely looked after and enjoyed several outings to tourist attractions – there's an extra incentive to qualify for Dubai.

Location clearly plays a pivotal role in squash's need to be seen – and Dubai has it in spades too. The sport is about to be lifted once more in 2017, as the World Series Finals will move a few minutes' walk to the Dubai Opera House, a multi-million dirham project which opens at the end of August, when Spanish tenor Plácido Domingo performs. Nearly 50 concerts are planned for the first few months, before squash moves on to the stage next June.

This isn't unique to squash and the sport is no newcomer to theatre over the last 30 years, but from Bromley (in the early 1980s) to Rotterdam – the city's Luxor Theatre providing the venue in 2011 – squash will be transcended like never before at Dubai's 2,000-capacity Opera House. These are changing times in commercial sport and squash is at the forefront.

SQUASH CONNECTS

By forming a 'Road to Dubai' template, squash has fallen in line with other sports who have focused on raising their profile with Middle East backing.

That's the view of Ziad Al-Turki, the PSA chairman (pictured below), who combined several years of meetings with Dubai municipal chiefs and some hard graft to bring squash to the emirate.

"By being in Dubai, big companies have started to take notice," says the 50-year-old, who has overseen the World Series Finals since 2009.

"I have been dreaming of a major brand with a world tour sponsor and I am hopeful of this happening soon. That is all down to us being associated with Dubai."

With the help of Falcon and Associates, who run all PR activity on behalf of the Dubai government, squash will be hosted for another two years in the emirate.

"Before, we weren't very secure with the Finals. Now everything is connected and it's easier," Al-Turki added.

"The sport is just unbelievably exciting and I don't get tired of it. I could watch it all day long."



The 2017 PSA World Series Finals will take place from June 6-10. For travel and ticket details www.worldseriesfinals.com