

THE MAKING OF JAHANGIR KHAN: 555

Alan Thatcher explains the reasoning behind his book with Rod Gilmour about one of the most famous unbeaten runs in sport

Jahangir Khan: the name means 'The Conqueror'. It would fit comfortably into the modern era, where every top squash player needs the gimmick of a nickname.

Very few of today's professionals were born when Jahangir was at his peak in the 1980s and Pakistan's implosion as a major squash force since then has further reduced awareness of the phenomenal accomplishments of an extraordinary family who brought glory to a newly-fledged nation.

Co-author Rod Gilmour and I felt that the story needed re-telling, especially as November 2016 was the 30th anniversary of the end of Jahangir's famous unbeaten run that lasted five years and eight months.

New Zealander Ross Norman was the man who terminated that sequence, in Toulouse in 1986, and he became world champion in the process.

Ross was a constant source of amazing material as Rod and I researched the book, *Jahangir Khan: 555*. For both of us, it was a richly rewarding experience talking to Jahangir's contemporaries, including Ross, Geoff Hunt, Chris Dittmar, Ricki Hill, Maqsood Ahmed, Phil Kenyon, Ian Robinson and Gawain Briars, plus the leading referee of that era, Graham Dixon.

Rahmat Khan revealed how he had filled the huge gap left by the sudden death of Jahangir's brother, Torsam, and developed a partnership that was to turn the squash world upside down.

And Hiddy Jahan was at his side nearly all the way, having predicted the success that Jahangir would achieve after training with the 14-year-old prodigy.

They all agreed that Jahangir had super-human powers of fitness and hit the ball harder than anyone else. The players all claimed you could tell when he was having



Ross Norman (second left) and Jahangir Khan at the launch of *Jahangir Khan: 555* with authors Alan Thatcher (far left) and Rod Gilmour

a practice hit because of the different noise the ball made.

We tracked down the records of fitness tests that Jahangir underwent and the results left the scientists gasping with astonishment as they compared his endurance power to that of a marathon runner.

Coaches and sports science experts would be aghast at the stories we also uncovered of the late Australian, Kevin Shawcross, a world top 10 player and a legendary party animal who literally drank himself to death.

For me, it was a wonderful trip down memory lane. Digging for information on the longest match in history, when JK beat Gamal Awad 3/1 in two hours 46 minutes on stage at the Chichester Festival Theatre in 1983, I uncovered a treasure trove of yellowing documents.

I had kept an old notepad with shorthand notes of every point in the match, plus newspaper cuttings, the tournament programme, carbon copies of reports and a copy of the marking sheet, which I got signed by both players. Amazingly, all this stuff had survived three house moves.

As a former editor of this publication, I also dug out hundreds of old photographs from that era, when hair was long, shorts were short and rackets were in the process of being transformed from tiny wooden weapons into the massive graphite beasts being used today.

In the end, photographer Steve Line delivered a brilliant selection of images that captured magical moments from Jahangir's career.

It was a totally transformational era, with tournaments moving from the confines of traditional plaster courts and on to see-through courts erected on stage in theatres, sports halls, nightclubs and TV studios. There were also changes in scoring and experiments with different balls to make the game more appealing to television.

It all seems a long time ago and when legendary players are reduced to names in the history books and modern players stop talking about them, we decided we wanted to bring Jahangir's incredible story back to life.

During the book launch at Wimbledon, one day short of the 30th anniversary of his epic victory in Toulouse, Ross said Jahangir had moved the game forward by at least 20 per cent.

We set out to help new generations uncover the story of the man who won the British Open 10 years in a row.

We could find no official records to verify the accuracy of the claim that his unbeaten run lasted 555 matches. It could be more; it could be less. We simply don't know. But nothing can undermine his phenomenal achievements.

We wanted to make sure that the name of Jahangir Khan will echo down the decades as the greatest squash player in history.

Jahangir Khan: 555

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