

Will he, won't he?

Will Ramy Ashour turn up for the Allam British Open and if he does, will he finish his matches? Richard Eaton asks the questions and finds out it is all about survival

If Ramy Ashour is fit enough to make another bid for the Allam British Open title, it may prove even more remarkable than the physical recovery which enabled him to save a match point in the most sensational world final of them all, at Doha last November.

If he is not, then this year's four months' rehabilitation - which led to his saving more match points in another big final, at El Gouna in April - will still have been remarkable in a different way.

Not only has Ashour's comeback after a knee operation in New York in January been harder than his six-month recovery before last year's World Championship, it has been, he says, the hardest thing he has ever done. That is because he did much of it alone.

Making a speedy and adequate recovery back home in troubled Cairo was almost impossible. So, instead, Ashour survived in a foreign city, summoning the discipline to recover physically and the fortitude to survive emotionally through strength of character.

"I had to be on my own in New York," Ashour said. "So I did my fitness on my own for four months. It was a big test for me personally.

"I wanted to discover if I could do this. It was another new challenge - living on my own, training and making sure everything was in order, staying away from family and friends. Somehow I did that."

Somehow too he went on to save four more match points in a final against the unfortunate Mohamed Elshorbagy, who may wonder what sin he has committed to find the boulder on the brow of the hill constantly rolling back.

Much of this has been due to Ashour's unique abilities to generate power from no backswing and to adapt his tactics outrageously while still half injured.

This latest improbable triumph occurred alongside the green palms, blue inlets and colourful corals, which inspire El Gouna's advertising claims as "life as it should be". Can that ever be so for the game's most frequently ailing player?

It is easy to doubt it. The torn meniscus which required Ashour's latest operation is related to a knee injury he had since he was 14.

"The older I get, the harder it gets, mentally and physically, to get back," he said. "I've had so many injuries so close to each other, I don't get much chance to forget them."

He did, though, have the support of three important medics in New York - David Altchek, the surgeon whose skill helped prolong his career, chiropractor Doug Seckendorf, and Brian Shiple, who helped fix his hamstrings before the World Championship.

"My brother (Hisham) was there too. But it's never as easy and comfortable as back home. Work-wise, though, I was more protected," Ashour explained.

He also had New York Athletic Club's facilities and the support of head professional Pat Canavan, as well as several sparring partners.

His routine was to get up at 8.30am, begin warm-up therapy and then work out. After the knee surgery the emphasis at first was on core and upper body work.

The first time he went on court, it was with crutches. Once he even went on court with a chair.

Afterwards there was physiotherapy and usually he got home by 6.30 or 7pm. Then there was washing, cleaning and laundry to do, and a meal to cook, as well as a need to talk to friends and family back home.

Coping with cultural differences was dramatic. "In Egypt I could come home in the middle of the day and sit down, and then go again," he said. "But there (New York) everyone has so much energy that if I slow down, I feel like I'm left out. I have to hustle all day. Surprisingly, I found I could do it. I was always thinking about hope."

Despite this, there were many days of despair. "Most people only see the glamour of the wins, not all of it," he said. "It requires a lot of perseverance, faith and other things.

"I don't like talking about the despair. It's not pretty and it doesn't help young people."

For some time after El Gouna the knee was swollen. "I am not sure if I'll be all right," he said before the Grasshopper Cup in Zurich, which ended with a quarter-final retirement only three weeks before the British Open.

Afterwards there was plenty of ice treatment, massage and rest. "Mentally I want to play more, but..." he trailed off.

If Ashour does play at the British Open, he will undoubtedly be its most popular overseas competitor. If he does not, this will still have been yet another improbably courageous phase of a stop-go career.

