

The late hero

Greg Gaultier tells Richard Eaton how he became squash's oldest first-time world men's champion

Greg Gaultier is the latest and therefore perhaps one of the greatest of squash heroes, so late that some thought his chance of becoming world champion had gone. No-one had achieved that honour for the first time as old as 32.

Others claimed his mind would not let him do it. Three times Gaultier seemed capable of winning world finals, yet somehow he could not take the final step. How he got himself into such a good place mentally this time is the most remarkable part of a uniquely emotional triumph.

"I'm better at dealing with those crucial moments," he claimed. "I'm calmer, even if I still appear intense."

How did he achieve his long-awaited success at Bellevue in the USA? There may be several answers. The most publicised is that the Frenchman connected with an uplifting cause like no squash player ever before. The defiant togetherness which followed the Paris terrorist attacks helped elevate Gaultier above the inner gremlins which had sometimes dragged him down.

"Hearts were broken, the French people and all around the world. But so many people came to talk to me and support me," he said.

Each time Gaultier spoke about that togetherness, he was applauded, boosting his confidence further. "I'm going to make it for myself, my country, my team and everybody who supports me," he proclaimed eventually after reaching the final.

"Here we are fighting on court, but with respect for each other - and outside

the court we have peace. That's what we want in this world."

Significant as this may have been, it hides the sheer scale of his mental achievement. No player had tried 14 times, or lost four finals, or had match points in a lost final, or been in the top five for a decade before winning a world title. "It is such a relief," he said.

So Gaultier's celebrations broke records too for melodrama. He leapt into a crouching war stance, sank to his knees in supplication, opened his arms to summon his coterie and clutched his opponent, Omar Mosaad, before pouring words into the Egyptian's ear after beating him 11-6, 11-7, 12-10 in 58 minutes.

Gaultier then hugged everyone within sight and touched hands with a line of people like a monarch collecting flowers. After a good weep he converted a tricolour into a gown, adding a magisterial flutter to his walk to receive the trophy.

He had wanted it far more than he had let on. "It has always been my dream," he said, tearing away the dissembling self-protection he had spun since first becoming world no.1 six years ago.

"I remember my first world final, 23 years old, by the pyramids in Egypt," he said. "I had five match balls and started to feel like I had a kind of asthma. My head was shaky and frozen. I couldn't finish it off.

"After that I kept wondering if it was ever going to happen. I thought maybe something or somebody is against me, you know. But I kept working hard. I was always disciplined."

That was another vital ingredient in

Gaultier's triumph. Physical condition improved his mental condition. So disciplined was he that coach Renan Lavigne had to argue fiercely to keep him away from a racket for three days after the Qatar Classic.

Another was the bonds Gaultier developed after the birth of his son, Nolan, to his partner, Veronica, three years ago.

Yet another was his team, not only Lavigne, but other coaches - André Delhoste, Fred Lecomte and Thomas Adrians - as well as Mathieu Benoît, both psychologist and physiotherapist, who helped get him in such excellent shape.

Even so, without allies in Bellevue who aided Gaultier's recovery from last moment sickness, everything might have been ruined. "They took care of me," he said of the family of Shabana Khan, the tournament's promoter and organiser. "When people make you feel that way, you cannot not win."

If ever a victory should be cathartic, it is this one. A more relaxed Gaultier might more easily access his great array of strokes and tactical options.

Moreover, six of the last 10 world champions have turned 30, with David Palmer, Thierry Lincou, Amr Shabana and Nick Matthew remaining contenders into their 35th year.

So Gaultier could well outlast Matthew and the often injured Ramy Ashour, while the younger Mohamed Elshorbagy, unexpectedly, has not yet become undisputed leader of the pack.

For the belated hero the best may be still to come.



Greg Gaultier's four previous World Championship finals finished in losses against (l to r) David Palmer in 2006 (Cairo), Amr Shabana in 2007 (Bermuda), Nick Matthew in 2011 (Rotterdam) and Matthew again in 2013 (Manchester)



Greg Gaultier (kneeling) cries tears of joy after clinching his first world title