

PSA World Championship

CLOUDY LINING TO EGYPTIAN TRIUMPH

Richard Eaton reviews Egypt's domination of the flagship event in men's squash in Cairo, crowned by Karim Abdel Gawad's first world title



The 'baby-faced assassin' was a tongue-in-cheek but over-used description of Karim Abdel Gawad during Eurosport's coverage of the 2016 PSA World Championship. However, it gained fresh meaning in Cairo in November, when Gawad eliminated the three best-known contenders to become an elegantly lethal new world champion.

The epithet suggested that what you saw wasn't at all what you got with Gawad. In some ways that seemed apt as the smooth-skinned, gentle-mannered Egyptian killed the hopes of Nick Matthew, Mohamed ElShorbagy and Ramy Ashour.

But it was also a little misleading. Emerging qualities had been evident in the 25-year-old Gawad for several weeks. A climax to that process came amidst savagely conflicting emotions at the Wadi Degla Club, where Ashour stumbled painfully

to another injury-afflicted halt in the final while an unusual new champion blossomed luxuriantly.

Calm to the verge of dreaminess, Gawad was nearly always dangerous with his short game. He was also strong with his parallel driving, particularly on the backhand. Together, his equanimity and skills were captivating, and his slightly awkward-looking physique was deceptive, for he moved smoothly and had a good engine.

Much of this suggested that Gawad had in fact been a top contender for some while. It hinted too that he might have been playing better than anyone even before his triumph in the Egyptian capital.

His achievements are nevertheless rare. Only one player has ever been seeded lower than the sixth-rated Gawad while winning a world title and only one had ever done it whilst beating more than three higher-rated players. In both cases that was Amr Shabana, his ally and advisor.



The most tumultuous tournament in the event's four decades

Karim Abdel Gawad outwits Mohamed ElShorbagy with a backhand drop in the semi-finals

A quarter of a century ago Rodney Martin beat Jansher Khan, Chris Dittmar and Jahangir Khan in a week of Australian delight in Adelaide. But Gawad's successes – against a runaway world no.1, the most successful player of the past five years and a remarkable three-time world champion – were at least comparable to Martin's.

The comparisons with Shabana were more appropriate, though. Shabana and Ashour, Egypt's first two world champions, have seven titles between them – yet no Egyptian had won it in front of a home crowd before. A long time afterwards Gawad was still muttering: "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it."

He had appeared not too affected by the pressure. Margins of success, however, are sometimes much tighter than they seem. Gawad's tremendous challenge almost did not ignite at all. He was 8-9 down in the final game against Mohamed Abouelghar in the second round and two games down against Nathan Lake, a qualifier, in the first.

He needed to take stock. "I spoke to Amr (Shabana) and he told me to focus just on taking baby steps," Gawad said. "Focus on one before moving to the next."

It worked so well that it carried Gawad towards his career-best win, against ElShorbagy, in the semi-finals. All seven previous encounters had been won by the favourite, but the eighth became a stunning reversal.

Gawad dominated the later stages of the

match in a 13-11, 10-12, 11-13, 11-2, 11-5 victory, despite having to retrieve a 2-9 deficit in the first game, letting slip a 5-0 lead in the second and losing the third after having a game ball at 10-9.

That point had felt pivotal. Instead, momentum shifted utterly the other way. When ElShorbagy found he was unable to bully Gawad with his hustle, he lost some of his accuracy and Gawad punished him skilfully, tearing through the fourth game in just five minutes.

ElShorbagy went straight to his mobile, apparently to call his mentor, Jonah Barrington, while his mother, Basma, hurried courtside – but in the decider he gave off anxious vibes. When Gawad reached 5-1 with a penalty point, earned by a lovely backhand drop, the match was hurtling towards a sensational finish.

That was briefly delayed by a three-minute time out, when ElShorbagy, troubled by an Achilles strain probably exacerbated by the constant forward and backward movements, sought a last-ditch respite. But he no longer had the mobility to prevent the dagger thrusts which earned Gawad four of his last six points at the front of the court.

The outcome was probably influenced by ElShorbagy's mind as much as his body. He had been exceptionally pumped up in the first game, which may have used a lot of emotional energy. There may have been other less tangible factors too.

ElShorbagy has sometimes felt less appreciated by Egyptian spectators than

he would like and quite obviously less loved than Ashour. At Giza, in the Al-Ahram International, ElShorbagy called out to the crowd: "I'm an Egyptian too". In Cairo there was no great wave of patriotism upon which he could surf.

Gawad's situation in the final was similar and he embraced it.

"Everyone knows Ramy and everyone watches squash because of Ramy," he acknowledged.

Karim Abdel Gawad

Sure enough, Ashour entered the arena to the week's most thunderous acclaim. But once again Gawad was unafraid to move his opponent forward, lethal though Ashour has sometimes been there. Egypt's star hope was jerked about with increasing discomfort to a sudden, silencing 5-11, 11-6, 11-7, 2-1 retired defeat.

Briefly, Ashour had seemed capable of snatching another barely believable world title from his competitive wilderness. Four exciting winners helped him take the first game and he moved eagerly to 6-5 ahead in the second.

But his physical difficulties became obvious when a silky drop-lob combination caused him to tumble and took Gawad to 8-6. Quite soon Ashour was told to make more effort to get to the ball, which was followed by a crucial penalty point

conceded while failing to clear adequately from a counter-drop.

That gave the second game to Gawad, who looked much more assured in the third. He lengthened the rallies and surged into a four-point lead, with Ashour merely hanging on, his movement far less elastic. Four rallies into the fourth game Ashour clutched suddenly at the hamstrings of his left leg.

A three-minute injury break was little more than a hopeful ritual. It was over, the anti-climactic outcome repeating the painful tale that has punctuated many of Ashour's last five frustrating years.

Gawad sat glumly amidst near silence. It was an incongruous atmosphere considering spectators had witnessed the first Egyptian to capture the world title on home soil. Not till Gawad was jostled by his coaches, Mohammed Abbas and Omar Abdel Aziz, did he break into a smile.

Ashour reckoned there wasn't much to say – before words, as usual, came tumbling out. "Sometimes the universe works in a way you can't understand," he observed.

"Whatever happens at the end of my life, I have to accept it. Many things happen in a mysterious way and I accept that.

"I thank my mind for being there for me and keeping me sane, my legs for supporting me and my arms for always giving me strength. I have been through a lot and every time I fall down, I learn."

Very wisely, Gawad did not compete with these outpourings. His triumph completed a hat-trick of victories over former world champions, though the quarter-final win over Nick Matthew was hardly in doubt. The Englishman did well merely to get onto the court, for he had been unwell and struggled to move freely during an 11-9, 11-4, 11-9 defeat.

Some may suggest the new world champion's achievement is tarnished by the ailments which hampered all of the four best-known contenders. But two were induced by the stress Gawad skilfully inflicted and the fourth was Greg Gaultier, who was in the other half.

The 33-year-old Frenchman's title defence came to a puncturing halt when an ankle injury forced his withdrawal before a semi-final with Ashour.

Gaultier admitted being "a bit lacking in match fitness" after an 80-minute, four-game encounter with Paul Coll, of New Zealand, and the injury followed another testing four-gamer, with Tarek Momen.

It contributed to perhaps the most topsy-

turvy, tumultuous tournament in the event's four decades. The tremors rumbled from the start, as two seeded Australians, Ryan Cuskelly and Cameron Pilley, departed immediately.

They were followed to the exit by Omar Mosaad, the Egyptian hero who reached last year's final. This time the third-seeded Mosaad let slip a 9-4 lead in the final game against Nafiizwan Adnan and missed a match point at 10-9 in a 6-11, 11-8, 12-10, 1-11, 12-10 loss to the Malaysian. A stunned crowd could barely believe it.

Later the ninth-seeded Mathieu Catrsagnet was ousted in straight games by the admirably enduring Daryl Selby and the sixth-seeded Ali Farag needed five games to survive against another long-lasting Englishman, James Willstrop, afterwards claiming he had found a way out of a psychological mire.

He managed that, Farag said, because "so many people were here talking to me – my parents, Nour (El Tayeb), my brother Shabana." The Wadi Degla club was indeed bubbling with togetherness, but tensions below the surface appeared too. They were manifested after Farag, Gawad, ElShorbagy and Ashour were joined by Momen and Fares Dessouky in the last eight, swelling Egyptian survivors to six. No country had done that before.

With a sick Matthew and a faltering Gaultier the other challengers, a historic Egyptian triumph was virtually assured. These pressures may have contributed to the bitterness which blighted the quarter-finals between ElShorbagy and Farag, and between Ashour and Dessouky.

Trouble began during ElShorbagy's 11-8, 11-5, 11-8 atonement for his loss to Farag six weeks previously at Giza, where he was upset by two calls. His performance now had a dark intensity.

Only two points away from the semi-finals, ElShorbagy became incensed by a referee's judgement that Farag's lob, sliding close to the out line, was in fact in.

So insistent was ElShorbagy that an argument erupted between the two players, later bringing allegations that he had called Farag "a thief".

Later still, though, the world no.1 uttered a peace offering. "Things can get tough; it's part of the sport and you have to deal with it," ElShorbagy sensibly said, before adding, perhaps ambiguously: "I felt I played in the right spirit, in a way I needed to – and I'm just glad I played fair."

Further eruptions came when Dessouky walked off before the finish of his encounter with Ashour, leaving the winning scoreline as 11-6, 17-15, 10-8 retired.

They happened after Dessouky became

frustrated by the referee repeatedly telling him to play the ball. Ashour was not "clearing up", he retorted. This was followed by an argumentative tiebreak, in which Dessouky failed to convert three game balls and got a conduct warning for dissent.

Dessouky took still greater offence at the penalty point, which, despite a video review, put him match point down. Informing Ashour that he was fed up with the decisions, he shook hands and departed.

"That was very stressful, definitely," Ashour commented, adding: "I don't want to get into too many details, but I just felt that God was giving me something when we were playing."



Ramy Ashour fires a winner in his stormy quarter-final against Fares Dessouky

He concluded, with typical philosophy: "I found it a challenge because life is not fun; it's supposed to be a burden. When things happen that way, I accept it and I go through it."

More important than the squabbles are the consequences of yet another injury for Ashour and another World Championship defeat for ElShorbagy. The game needs these two exceptional players.

This was the most agonising of ElShorbagy's three big losses – two as the top seed and one as favourite, in the 2014 final – that have left him still without a world title. "Frankly, playing the tournament at home is a heavy responsibility, because I want to make all Egyptians happy," was his most insightful comment.

Ashour spoke as though judgement day was near. "I keep learning the hard way and there is always so much to learn," he said. "But as long as I am breathing, I will keep trying." These were poignant contrasts to Gawad's gracious optimism.

Altogether, however, Egypt's dazzling triumphs have a cloudy lining. Other nations have a tougher task than ever to develop players capable of reaching the later stages of major events, let alone winning them.

As Gawad surmised, the ramifications may be profound. "Seven Egyptians in the top 10 – when other countries develop in the sport, then squash could be included in the Olympics," he told *The Daily News* in Egypt. If so, it may be a lengthy wait.