

# Wagih's American Dream

Richard Eaton talks to former Egyptian national coach Amir Wagih about his new life and project in the USA

Few have better timing than Amir Wagih. It's not so much that the coach who oversaw the capture of more than 30 world titles for Egypt knows how a ball should be hit. Rather, he recognises the moment when a life-changing deal can be done.

The balance of power in squash is shifting with the deteriorating politics in Egypt and improving economics in America, and Wagih has shifted with them, crossing an ocean to do it.

After enjoying two decades of sensational success in Cairo, he

has found a new home and a startling new enterprise in

Washington, the American capital, where a multi-millionaire property entrepreneur, Anthony Lanier, has been planning a ground-breaking new squash club.

These sudden changes have been caused partly by the

dramatic loss of funding suffered by Egyptian squash, both from the Government and from sponsors, amidst the tortured aftermath of that country's revolution. The reduction may be as much as 80 percent, according to one source.

It has brought shrinking financial support for Egyptian players, with a risk that higher-earning competitors may lose funding entirely, and sad rumours of big names, notably Amr Shabana, being absent from some events.

Fears for the future have followed, but Wagih has replaced his with optimism about the present. The vision he shares with Lanier is of a hub for high-quality competitors, combined with an eye-catching social centre in an innovative setting, which can be a model for the further development of squash clubs in America.

It should hold camps for big-name players, become a venue for the US Open and stage a tournament with an all-glass court in front of the White House.

"It won't be like squash in front of the pyramids, but it should still be special," said Wagih, whose remit will expand beyond coaching. "Big dreams are happening. I'd like an academy like Bollettieri's in tennis."

It would be tough to blame him for leaving now, though some will. These are dark days for Egypt, but Wagih can no longer ply his trade there as he did. He also has a wife, son and daughter to care for, and at the age of 45 has less time to spare.

His leap westwards comes when United States squash has been bucking the western world's worrying financial trends. "In two years we can have a brand name which is known everywhere," Wagih claims.

That name will be Squash On Fire, a semi-humorous appellation devised by Lanier's squash-playing daughter, Camille, partly because the club will occupy a space above a fire station.

However, the plans are certainly serious. They depict an artistically-constructed glass building which receives permanent sunlight, has a roof garden and is open 24 hours a day. No one has created anything like that before. Building starts later this year and it will open in about 18 months.

"It's such a big step in my life. I worked hard for 23 years and we won all those world titles," he said, reflecting on his uniquely successful stint with the Egyptian Squash Association. "And then came the revolution.

"You know, the situation became insecure. I was really sad. But I'm very happy to have met Mr Anthony and



Amir Wagih, the former Egyptian national coach now based in the USA

become involved in Squash On Fire. It's the right time."

Wagih wants to retain connections with Egyptian squash and hopes leading players will visit Squash On Fire. He may occasionally take time off to coach Egyptian squads, but his main focus will be as an American galvanizer.

This new vision seems potentially very fruitful because U.S. Squash claims some of the fastest-growing participation levels of any country. There was an estimated growth in participation of 82 percent between 2007 and 2011, increasing the total to 1.2 million players, while junior involvement has reportedly increased more than 400 percent during the same period.

Tournaments and prize-money levels have increased, too. All this has built a platform for further growth and created a springboard for a great leap forward if squash is accepted as an Olympic sport later this year.

Wagih's hopeful present and problematic past have another closer and more surprising connection. It comes through Lanier's daughter, Camille, and her enthusiasm for taking a squash racket wherever her family travelled.

Father takes up the story: "We met a coach, Mohammed Awad, who was funny and exciting, and who one day said that we should take Camille to Egypt.

"I thought this is, like, crazy - she's 14. The girl is going to Egypt? An American in the Arab world! The Iraq War! Absolutely crazy!

"Six months later she went with him and my wife and son, and the whole family moved to Egypt to watch this crazy, difficult game."

He laughs, because they found it easy to develop friendships, and Camille became good enough to reach the quarter-finals of open junior events in Europe. And sometimes they would come across Wagih.

"Going to Egypt was a huge success. Khaled Sobhy was instrumental in

convincing parents in America that it was safe to take children to Egypt," Lanier emphasised, referring to the Egyptian father of Amanda Sobhy, the former world junior champion who was born and raised in New York.

"Amir is here in Washington because he is my friend, and I want this to be a great opportunity for him and for me. With everything you do in life you need some luck.

"Someone else's bad luck can be your good fortune. I liked Egypt very much. I have seen Egypt through the eyes of Egyptians. But we have a situation in the US where we will be building cutting-edge squash facilities at a time when demand and availability are increasing. Wagih has hit the jackpot."

Wagih reckons this is his last job in coaching. He expects to return home to Cairo when he finishes his stay in Washington, though what Egypt will be like then no one can know.

But although its politics remains uncertain and its squash funding problematic, and even if its number of outstanding juniors may reduce, Egypt should not suffer an immediate decline in its brilliant group of top-level players.

A better scenario was depicted by Hany Hamouda, a vice-president of the Egyptian Squash Federation, who says that a plan to stage a televised tournament in front of the Luxor temple later this year is the federation's statement of defiance against the setbacks.

Despite that, he is honest about what Egyptian squash is facing in the longer term. "The Government is cutting the funds," Hamouda said. "We don't get the

same as before, through Government or sponsors, because the political situation affects the economic situation.

"I don't think this will affect our standard for some time because we have some very good young ones coming through, but now it's only talent (which is doing it).

"Maybe we can continue at the top for some time. But now no one is pushing. It's slowing down. For two or three years we will be on top, but after that I don't know."

He reminds us that Ramy Ashour is still young, that so too is Omar Mosaad, and that Mohamed Elshorbagy is even younger. Behind them are the emerging Tarek Momen and Karim Abdel Gawad. Then there is Marwan Elshorbagy, the younger brother, who is only 20.

"There are plenty of good players, but when you look at local tournaments, you can see that the (number of) juniors are not the same," Hamouda says. "After two years with the unsteady political situation, the sport has suffered.

"Everyone realises that. People in the Government understand this very well. The proof of that is they asked the Squash Federation to put on an event this year. We want to stage it in the Luxor temple, where we had the opera."

Its format is being discussed. It could be a World Cup, an event with national teams of two men and one woman, and prize money of £75,000, which was previously held in India.

"It's mainly for the promotion of tourism, not the promotion of squash," Hamouda says. "But the Government is paying for this tournament, to encourage us, to show that squash is still alive."

That will be most people's hope, given Egypt's exceptional contribution to world squash in the last decade and a half. And times can change again.

Most Egyptians know that, with guarded feelings. Most Americans know that, usually with optimism. But not many respond to it like Wagih, the man who crossed an emotional ocean.

An artist's impression of Squash On Fire, the club in Washington DC where Amir Wagih is to be based

