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A PULSATING TOURNAMENT

Richard Eaton reports on a record-breaking British Open Championships in Hull

Gregory Gaultier (right) on the attack against Nick Matthew in the men's final

France's Greg Gaultier became the oldest winner of the British Open since Azam Khan in 1962, when he beat home favourite Nick Matthew, the oldest finalist since Hashim Khan in 1958, in a brilliantly athletic, four-game final which belied their ages.

The 34-year-old Frenchman's 8-11, 11-7, 11-3, 11-3 win over the 36-year-old Englishman earned him a third British Open title and made him the oldest world no.1 in the history of a PSA ranking system which began in the 1970s. Matthew's victory over title holder Mohamed ElShorbagy in the semi-finals had already ensured the Egyptian would lose the top spot.

Earlier, Laura Massaro became the first English woman in 58 years to win the title for a second time when she beat compatriot Sarah-Jane Perry 11-8, 11-8, 6-11, 11-6. It was the first time since 1953 that England had three of the four finalists.

The semi-finals saw Massaro cleverly reverse the five-game scoreline of the last World Championship final, which she lost from 2/0 up against Egypt's Nour El Sherbini, and then Sarah-Jane Perry

was too aggressively creative for Malaysia's nine-year former world no.1, Nicol David.

There were very few lows in this pulsating tournament – until Ramy Ashour, the sport's most charismatic player, was forced to retire in the semi-finals with yet another injury, perhaps a gluteal problem, after only one game. It meant Gaultier only had to play 116 minutes in four matches and so reached the final looking as fresh as the Hull spring daffodils.

The biggest shocks included a loss for Egypt's Nouran Gohar, the women's fourth seed, who was beaten in the first round on a plaster court by qualifier and compatriot Nada Abbas. However, the defeat of world champion Karim Abdel Gawad by fellow Egyptian and world no.23 Mohamed Abouelghar, just one match before Gawad could have become world no.1, was

perhaps the most extraordinary moment of a tumultuous week.

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP CONTENDERS

Expect most of the beaten Egyptians to perform better by the Red Sea than by the Humber. Their modest showing here may be related not only to foreign conditions, but also to the imminence of the World Championship and a World Series men's tournament at El Gouna.

There, Raneem El Welily may acquire a more consistent focus, in which case she could win the title that eluded her by one agonising point in 2014. Nour El Sherbini may have no need for mobile-phone dialogue before tense fifth games – as she did against Laura Massaro – and may perhaps feel more secure, in which case she will be a genuine favourite. Also, Nouran Gohar won't have to start on a

strange, bouncy, distant court, which may have disrupted her rhythm. Any one of this trio could bring triumphant publicity to a politically-beleaguered Egypt.

Nicol David is still in with a chance. She was better physically and tactically than for more than a year, and looked good enough to have reached the final. The other 33-year-old, Massaro, is in an even better place. She remains physically strong, and is tactically and emotionally better than ever – but taking on a clutch of gifted Egyptians in their backyard is a formidable task.

MOHAMED ELSHORBAGY

ElShorbagy's spell of indifferent form continued and his long run as world no.1 ended in the semi-finals, when Nick Matthew's consistency and tactical excellence pressurised him into errors at the end of long, fierce rallies.

It was a strange tournament for him, characterised by bouts of noisy anger and impassioned court-side calls from his mother, Basma, but producing two courageous recoveries against dangerous compatriots Fares Dessouky and Ali Farag.

There was also a claim from ElShorbagy that winning or losing the title, or the top ranking was less important than the personal challenge life was now presenting him. The prolonged shouting at certain stages was, he said, a way of regaining the passion which helped him to the top – though one referee ordered ElShorbagy to stop shouting at him!

Against Dessouky in the first round he had been 3-6 down in the fifth game and against Farag in the quarter-finals 7-9 down in the fourth and within two points of defeat. He prevailed when it had seemed unlikely and failed when he seemed he might succeed. It was undoubtedly a watershed tournament, from which he will take stock, possibly painfully.

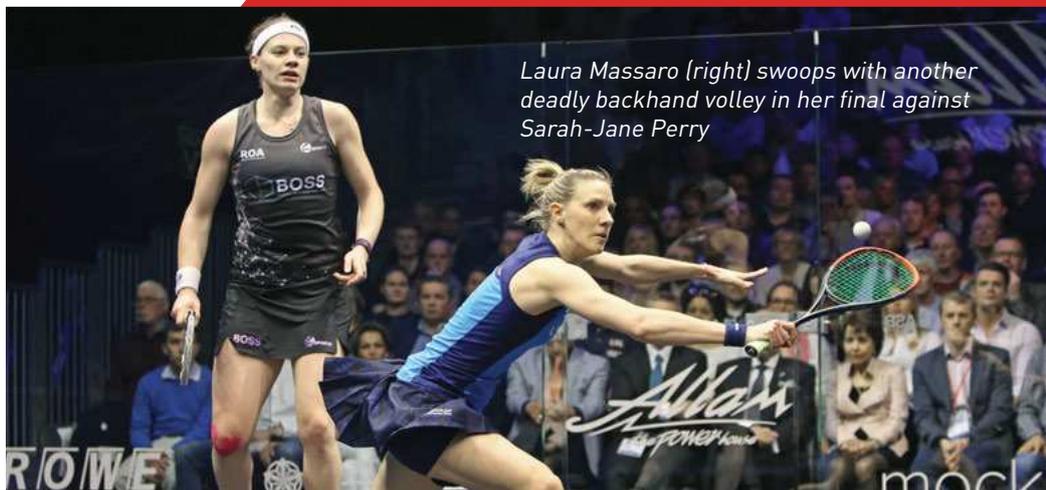
DIEGO ELIAS

The former world junior champion from Peru struggled more than expected to win in four games against English qualifier Nathan Lake on the bouncier plaster courts in the first round, but made the rapid transition to the all-glass show court – where he was plunged into a body-jerking encounter with Ramy Ashour – quite well.

He was far from overawed and although beaten 11-9, 11-6, 12-10 by the sport's most gifted player, he led 8-6 in the first game and 10-8 in the third. Elias had really needed to capitalise on his good start.

Once Ashour pocketed the first game, he performed much more like the game's most dazzling maverick and after he had taken the second, Elias struggled to keep him away from the front court.

He did better in the third, before Ashour turned it around in the last four points with



Laura Massaro (right) swoops with another deadly backhand volley in her final against Sarah-Jane Perry

brilliantly-constructed rallies that were impossible to resist.

At least Elias received more than routine praise from his famous opponent. "Diego was putting me into all the corners and if I wasn't moving well, I couldn't have coped," Ashour said.

The 20-year-old played well enough at a high pace to have asked questions of a genius.

MATCHES OF THE TOURNAMENT

We were so spoilt for choice. There was Mohamed ElShorbagy's two noisy, dramatic escapes, against Fares Dessouky and Ali Farag. There was Ramy Ashour's survival from two games down and 7-9 adrift in the third against Mohamed Abouelghar in the quarter-finals. And there was Greg Gaultier's surgical 31-minute destruction of worthy Australian Cameron Pilley in the second round, which was as close to perfection as any player could get.

But Abouelghar's sensational 3/1 victory over Karim Abdel Gawad in the second round was probably my favourite. For prolonged spectacular hitting, especially from the little-known world no.23, this can rarely if ever have been bettered. Abouelghar's risk-taking commitment, along with Gawad's brilliant creativity and movement, suggested that the elite men's game is taking a new, even more adventurous tactical direction. It is already a vastly-improved spectacle from 20 years ago.

Laura Massaro's semi-final recovery against Nour El Sherbini was also right up there among the best. France's Camille Serme squeezed out a dramatic 3/1 victory too, over Egypt's Nour El Tayeb, whose spirited third and fourth-game fightbacks were punctured by dramas surrounding two contentious penalty-stroke decisions. Stressed referees need better working conditions.

PLAYERS OF THE TOURNAMENT

Not only did **Mohamed Abouelghar** achieve a career-best with a place in the quarter-finals of the British Open, he also beat world champion Karim Abdel Gawad 6-11, 12-10, 11-9, 11-7 and led Ramy Ashour by two games and by 9-6 in the third

before losing 10-12, 7-11, 11-9, 11-5, 11-5. "I have to say just how amazing he played," Ashour told the crowd, which brought spontaneous applause. Abouelghar's utter commitment to attack, his extraordinarily high-risk, narrow margin of error and his sensational movement could drag the men's game into a more fluid and more spectacular tactical era, especially as Ashour, Gawad and one or two others are capable of playing in comparable fashion.

Sarah-Jane Perry reached her first World Series final and showed how much she has developed. She changes the direction of the ball brilliantly and struck more than 30 winners in beating Nicol David for a second time. She is now a threat to anyone. Expect further improvement.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Nada Abbas, a 16-year-old from Giza, who has already been a professional for two years, became the British Open's youngest-ever sensation by beating one of the title contenders on her first appearance in the 88-year-old event. The self-possessed teenager beat her powerful Egyptian compatriot, Nouran Gohar, a runner-up last year, 12-10, 14-12, 5-11, 11-8, cleverly slowing down the rallies against one of the world's most formidable hitters.

Another eye-catcher was **Mayar Hany**, a 20-year-old from Cairo, who beat Joelle King, the ninth seed from New Zealand, in four well-contested games and then played a good third game against Laura Massaro.

Meanwhile, Fares Dessouky, who has impressed before, suggested he may have all the attributes once he copes with his emotions. For long periods against Mohamed ElShorbagy he appeared the more complete player.

Another with considerable potential is **Paul Coll** on the evidence of a 38-point third game against the eighth-seeded Egyptian, Tarek Momen. It had a mesmerising whirlwind of patterns created by two of the fastest movers in the game. Though Momen won 11-6, 11-9, 20-18, Coll suggested he is the best New Zealander since former world champion Ross Norman a quarter of a century ago.