

THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT QUIT

Gaultier in ecstasy after his comeback win over Omar Mosaad in January

Charismatic Frenchman Gregory Gaultier tells Richard Eaton about defying age, the doctors and the doubters

Not many people thought Gregory Gaultier could make a comeback after a nasty, tenacious, frightening knee injury. Medics were ominously non-committal about the outcome of multiple surgeries. The gossip was whisperingly negative. The odds, at the age of 37, were stacked against him. The career of one of the most colourful, ubiquitous and history-making players seemed over.

After 14 months away from the tour, and with a ranking which had slipped 600 giddy places, Gaultier was fearful himself. And yet miraculously here he is again – training like a demon and, after three tournaments pre-coronavirus, back with a chance of becoming the oldest high-level male competitor the men's world tour has ever had.

But his motivation is more primal than any of this. "I was very scared not to be able to play any sports anymore," he said. "The feeling of being back on court is magic".

His life as a player has emerged from a deep-seated need, not just from choice. The routine of training and practising, the thrill of competing and celebrating, followed by preparation for the next odyssey of travel, action, comradeship and drama – all of this has been fundamental to his sense of self.

It has also created powerful forces which have driven another remarkable journey – an internal one which carried him from an anxious, insecure young lad to a popularly acclaimed hero of unusual skill, exceptional movement, and brightly flowering humour.

So when one of the surgeons said to him: "Look man, it's going to be impossible to

play competitive sport again," his resistance to this was driven by deep and powerful instincts. It was "like someone taking your baby and running away," he said.

Disaster struck on 11 October 2018 in Philadelphia, when Gaultier limped off from a 74-minute five-game battle with Ali

Farang at the US Open, nursing a piece of broken bone in his knee. The worst part, he says, was being unsure exactly what the injury was. Not till later was it identified as a stress fracture, one which deteriorated so badly that he couldn't walk any more.

Not only did Gaultier resist this dreaded

assessment, he found rational explanations for the instincts which did so. "My physios were working, like, hours every day on me, and didn't want to give up," he said. "When I see people around me working like that it gives me strength. I never let myself down. I kept believing it was still possible".

There have been golden memories on which to feed, nourishing his sense of destiny. He had won both the World and the British Open, something no other French player had done. He had spent 20 months as world number one. And he had been in the world's top ten continuously for almost 15 years, making him one of the most consistent top-level male players ever.

Flashbacks of these heart-warming achievements mingled with his daily boost of endorphins which the training generated in him. He needed that, he admitted, "like a drug." It drew him back into comforting routines which had been fundamental not only to his success, but to his transformation as a person.

Gaultier's father died of cancer when he was only three, and he began playing squash the following year. There was a court at the family home at Epinal, in eastern France. "I hit the ball on my own for hours every day - and that's how it all started," he recalled. "I learned to love it, and I always have.

"When I first started I wanted to go on the court all the time, running home from school to play squash! I never really thought about doing anything else. I never enjoyed losing and competition motivated me from a young age. It kept me going."

His mother remarried and the family built a four-court club in Audincourt, near the border with Switzerland. Gaultier trained there till he was 13, and travelled to Strasbourg every month, where he met Andre Delhoste, the former French national coach, who saw his potential. This led to Gaultier moving to Aix-en-Provence, the location of a new national academy.

But these were not easy years. "When I was a kid I wasn't quiet and perhaps not the best behaved," Gaultier admits. "But you learn over time how to focus." Here squash became the making of him. It may even have been his saviour.

That focus, forged in the fierce heat of emotional need, has brought more than just fame and success. It has helped him find love, responsibility and beautiful surroundings. Gaultier married Veronica Koukal, the sister of Czech player Jan Koukal, in July 2014 at Prague, and he has lived in the Czech capital ever since with their son Nolan. This most charming of cities has changed the mood of Gaultier's life.

"I live just ten minutes from the city centre,"

he says. "It's a very easy, convenient city, not a big city and not with crazy traffic - which I like. I love the architecture. It's just beautiful to walk around with the castle one side of the river, and on the other side the old town square with all these little streets with shops, restaurants and bars."

Wisely though, he maintained a place in Aix-en-Provence. He returns once in a while "to train with the Frenchies," as he puts it, and see friends. "I've been happy living that way for the last few years. Now let's see what the future will be like."

So far the future has revealed only glimpses. After returning to competition late in November with a match in the French league and with the painful right knee carefully supported, Gaultier said: "I have lived a nightmare but have been fighting every single day to be able to do what I loved ever since I was four years old."

After winning his tour comeback match at the Tournament of Champions in New York, he shrilled: "It's a dream, I'm like a kid again!" A crazy on-court victory jig said so too.

That excess burst from the escape of his 14 months of purgatory. "The thought of not being able to play again was like a heart-breaker, so I decided to give it my all. But at the beginning I did five or six hours of physio, and it was boring stuff," he said.

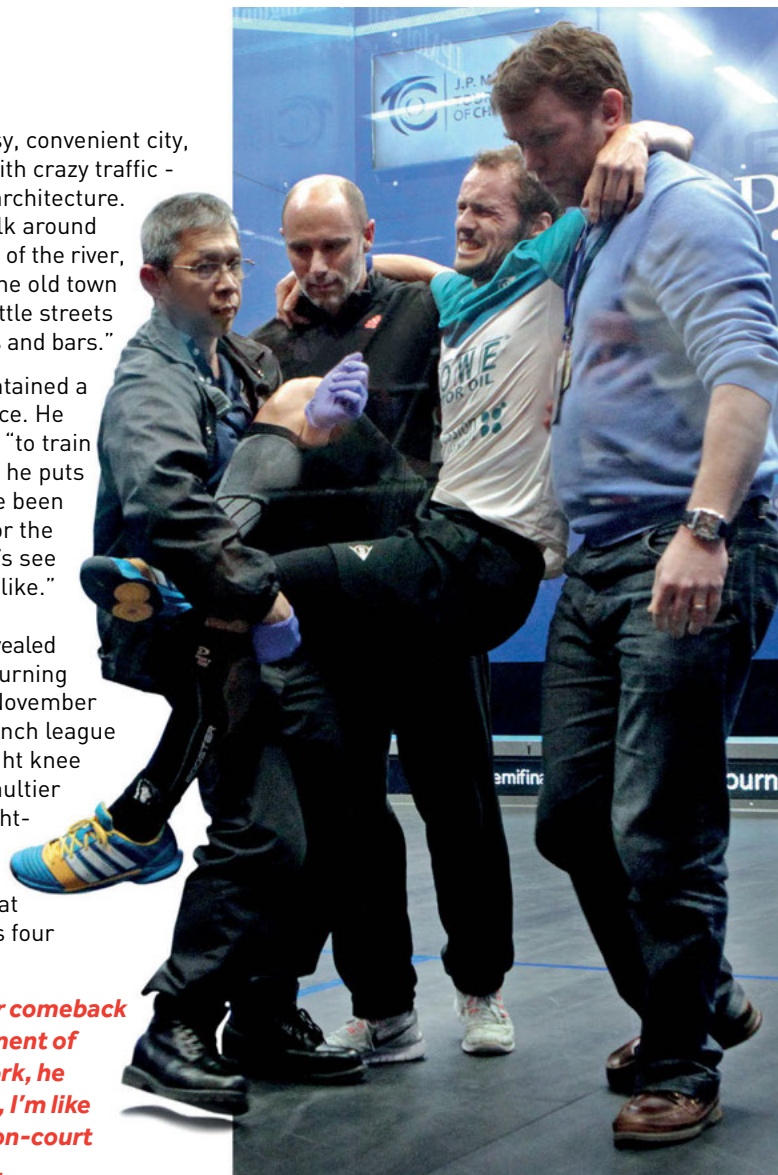
"I would go to the club to watch the guys playing and get used to seeing the game again - the balls, the lights, the way they play - so that when I started again I wasn't lost.

"I don't feel any pressure now. I think the pressure is on the guys who face me because they don't know what to expect. But now I really want to beat some of them, because I spent one year just watching them play. And it wasn't fun.

"When you have been on the physio table for one year and have the chance to play, whoever your opponent is it's not so important. What is important is me, and thinking that if I play well I have a chance to win.

"Now I don't know what is going to happen, but I'm sure I'll be able to beat a few of those top ten guys."

If he does there is a chance Gaultier's career could last even longer than Nick Matthew (retired at almost 38) and perhaps



even of Jonah Barrington (retired at 40). He has already lasted longer than Amr Shabana (retired at 36). Gaultier will be 38 at the end of this year.

But the injury has left him with limitations which even he acknowledges. How great will these be?

"I'm so happy at least to be back playing, of course with the handicap of a knee that will never be the same," he admits. "I'm playing at a decent level - not the level I dreamt of, but I do want to compete again.

"I don't feel a need to stop: it's pure joy for me to keep going. I didn't fix any age that I can play again. I want to come back and do some surprise results if possible. Let's wait and see, but that's fun for me. I want to give it a go one more time and I will try my best".

Gaultier always had unusually powerful forces propelling him onwards - an addictive love which evolved into a fundamental need. Now it is mixed with obstinacy.

"When you're broken for 15 months you've got people telling you that you will never come back and you will never do any sport again in your life.....," he growled, thought, and paused. "I was like: 'I think you're talking to the wrong person'."