



Waters close to high

Richard Eaton reports on Alison Waters' extraordinary comeback from a career-threatening Achilles tendon injury

A revitalised force has emerged with such speed and consistency in recent months that she may make a significant impact on the two most important women's squash events of 2012.

The force has new ingredients yet bears a familiar name – Alison Waters, whose tenacious rescue of her career from prolonged injury at the age of 28 has created a new momentum.

So magnificently has the former world no. 3 used a year's absence to enhance her fitness, to discipline her mind and to crank her motivation up to inspiring new levels that she now has realistic hopes of bettering that career-highest ranking.

She has acquired many new admirers in the process, especially those who witnessed how fast she hit the ground running – literally and metaphorically – after returning to the WSA Tour in March.

Before long she had won five titles,

climbed 30 places back into the world's top 10, offered England a better chance of regaining the world team title and raised hopes of a prolonged run at the World Open.

Nobody has described the extent of this achievement better than Phil Newton, head of the sports injury rehab centre at the Lilleshall National Sports Centre.

"I have been doing rehab since the mid 80s and in all that time I have never come across anyone more motivated and professional than Alison," Newton said.

"Even when you can't go on court, there are different kinds of training which can still be done and she actually came back stronger! But it has to be done day in, day out, for months – and that required massive mental strength from her."

Crucial was Waters' flight to Sweden for an ankle operation by Hakan Alfredson, a well-known surgeon who removed a bone spur which had been aggravating her Achilles tendon. She also used the surprising exercises he pioneered in the 1990s as part of her rehab.

But it could easily have all gone wrong. Waters had to cope with the knowledge that it would be many months before she could play again, with a realisation that even then she might never be as good.

She also suffered a cruel eight-week

setback in November, just when her comeback seemed imminent. Anticipation was turning to excitement when a calf muscle began to cause trouble, forcing her to miss the World Open and the Hong Kong Open.

Such a belated disappointment was "pretty tough", she admitted. And so, to "clear her head", she took a holiday in Dubai. She learned to become philosophical. "There are always people much worse off than us," she said.

"Most people have these setbacks," Newton commented. "People in our medical team know that being optimistic and positive and outgoing often decides who really recovers. What she achieved is an amazing feat."

Having achieved it, Waters may have acquired similar advantages to those which Nick Matthew, England's male world champion, gained during a lengthy recovery from a shoulder injury four years ago.

One is a profound realisation of how much squash means to her, another is a deeper commitment. This has created greater willingness to analyse her game – not previously a strength – and eventually to enhanced self-belief.

"Obviously it could have been a career-threatening injury," she said. "But I never



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looked at it like that. I would see everyone playing, and travelling around, and winning tournaments. And that made me want it more.

"I really missed it. I love going to tournaments. I always did. That was the motivation."

She survived by making stepping stones rather than focusing on such a faraway goal. She learned more about herself, so that if she felt depressed, she could find ways of dealing with it.

"As soon as I got a niggle, I would get really down," said Paul Carter, the leading coach who has been associated with Waters' career for 16 years and a former British national champion. "Of course she had ups and downs, but I have never seen anyone as upbeat as she was."

These qualities may perhaps have been absorbed from those among whom she grew up. "All my friends and family are positive," Waters said. "People like that play an important part."

But mostly they will have emerged from her attitude. Those who know her speak of her lively smile and lively nature. An example of the buccaneering cheerfulness with which she approached the chore of training appears in one of her blogs.

"It's tough, but everyone really enjoys it

and my aim is not to come last doing the running sessions ...as I do tend to find myself!" she wrote. "I am totally out of my comfort zone running!!!" she added, before concluding: "It will be interesting to see which one of the boys cries first...ha!"

That hinted at the steely determination which has grown behind a pleasant exterior. It is a long way from the quiet, shy and timid girl whom Carter met all those years ago at Southgate Squash Club in north London, where her mother Robin ran coaching sessions.

His confident teaching style brought a rapport which others couldn't create. "I have quite a tactile approach," Carter said. "I like to be close. I would take a step forward towards her and she would take a step back. Then if I took another step, she would go further backwards!"

"We would laugh about it when she was older. It was a bit of a game I used to play – which helped her develop as a player and a person."

Waters was so tiny that there were jokes about her being no bigger than a racket, especially after she became a national champion at only nine and a half. But she had a straight arm swing, which Carter needed to sort out, as well as a tendency to be over-awed, which he helped dispel.

She is now less fearful, more driven. "She became aware that time is not on her side," Carter said of the changes during her absence. "Her approach has become very clinical. She uses her time more wisely now."

There followed a string of good results, with wins over Laura Massaro, Madeline Perry, Kasey Brown, Low Wee Wern, Omneya Abdel Kawy, Donna Urquhart and Joelle King.

They brought titles in Montreal, Toronto, Dublin, Paris and Matamata (New Zealand), as well as joy in discovering that she is potentially even better than she was.

Not only did she still have the speed, attacking instincts and eye for a volley with which to impose herself on the middle of the court, but she had more mature perspectives too.

These were indicated by reactions to the two defeats during the first five months of her comeback. One was in five games against Annie Au, the top 10 player from Hong Kong, at the British Open in London in May. The other came in four games to Nicol David in the quarter-finals of the Australian Open in Canberra in August.

The loss to Au made Waters go through every detail of how it had happened – a cold court, a muted response to her opponent's softly manoeuvring game and switching off a little after gaining a two-game lead. Three months later at the Australian Open Waters had her revenge in straight games.

Her 68-minute 10-12, 11-1, 11-7, 15-13 loss to David – after getting to within one good blow of a decider and stretching

England team poser

Will England's women regain the world team title? The question is more contentious than it may sound. Six years have passed since the sport's most affluent country last won the women's world team title and in the last two decades, remarkably, England have won it only twice.

Now this is the most open field ever, with four nations in with a real chance of becoming world champions, a suggestion which excludes the capable New Zealanders, who have two players in the world's top 20.

That quartet includes the 2008 world champions, Egypt, who have a tremendous bevy of rising young players, title-holders Australia, who still have some famous names and an admirable reputation for obstinacy, and Malaysia, who now have another top 10 player to support the legendary Nicol David.

Arguably, though, the likely return of Alison Waters, whose Achilles injury belatedly sidelined her last time, makes England potentially the strongest team.

"You would hope we are in a stronger position this time," national coach Chris Robertson says. "I think we have a good chance of winning. But we don't want to talk it up too much."

"That way it will make us stronger than the occasion. If we create an atmosphere and the right environment, then you stand a much better chance of being on top at the end."

Malaysia could win for the first time if Low Wee Wern delivers at number two, Australia can hope to prosper again from having a team of even strength and Egypt may field an entire team aged 23 or under, all capable of raising their game to new levels.

However, Laura Massaro, Jenny Duncalf and Waters may be marginally the best trio – but only if all arrive in top shape and with the strength of mind to deliver.



The last time England won the women's world team title: England's 2006 team of Jenny Duncalf, Alison Waters, Vicky Botwright and Tania Bailey celebrate

How to rehab like Alison

After Alison Waters' Achilles tendon operation, performed by Hakan Alfredson, she did a lengthy stint of the modern strengthening exercises created by the pioneering professor of sports medicine in Sweden.

These were developed, according to the story, after Alfredson's boss in the 1990s refused to allow him to have surgery because his Achilles injury wasn't considered serious enough and the clinic claimed it couldn't afford him to take time off work.

So the frustrated Alfredson sought to aggravate the injury with a series of painful exercises. To his surprise, however, the injury disappeared!

These exercises are now considered an effective first treatment, although it can sometimes be difficult to convince patients to trust that the sometimes-uncomfortable treatment will work if they stick at it for long enough.

The Alfredson method involves 'heel drops', repeated 180 times a day for 12 weeks.



This is how to do a 'heel drop':

- Stand on tiptoe on the bottom step of a staircase, hands lightly supporting either side. Place the front part of the foot of the affected leg on to the edge of a step. Lower the body by dropping the heel of the affected leg slowly over the edge in a controlled way. Then place the foot of the

non-affected leg on the step to raise the body back to the starting point.

- If this is too difficult or if both Achilles are affected, try to raise the body up using two legs (sharing the load) and then come down on a single leg (a two up, one down concept). If that still won't work, use arms on a railing.
- Perform 3 x 15 heel drops with the knee straight and 3 x 15 with the knee bent. Repeat them twice daily.

The Achilles tendon connects calf muscles to the heel bone. In this exercise the calf muscles are lengthening while you try to contract them, which means it is described as an eccentric exercise (don't be alarmed – this is a term contrasting it with concentric exercises).

Pain and thickening of the tendon, usually without inflammation, is thought to affect as many as half of all recreational runners at some time. It can be associated with many different and varying factors – for instance, wearing high heels!

the world no.1 to her longest match for more than a year – caused Waters to mull over what she might have done differently rather than dwell on the excellence of her performance.

"I played well and had my chances, and if I had won the fourth, anything could have happened," Waters said. "So overall I'm pleased.

"At the same time I'm also annoyed, as I was definitely in there. It's good to build on for next time and I have taken things away to work on."

These responses hint at the input of Chris Robertson, England's head coach, who has changed one or two things in Waters' short game, but most of all emphasises tactical awareness. He encourages assessments not only of why she lost matches, but also of how she won them. Winning well does not guarantee winning next time.

"I think she will only get better because she's still learning and that's exciting," said Robertson, who believes Waters can get closer still to David.

"Nicol David is getting a bit older and the gap is closable," he said. "But Nicol is a very dedicated, focused and disciplined individual who is used to winning, has that winning mentality and understands what to do in big tournaments."

The record-breaking David rarely loses, but Robertson points out: "It needs to be realised that certain styles suit Nicol a bit more.

"By all accounts Alison took her on physically (in Canberra), and played hard and fast, which is her preference. You can get a lot of joy from that because although Nicol is a great athlete, you nullify her potential strengths if you can match up to that.

"Laura (Massaro) has done it well by taking the pace off the game. Alison is the type of player who can go on hard physically, whereas Laura probably wouldn't want to do that.

"These ladies now see Nicol as vulnerable and believe someone can push her and beat her. Alison is trying to get a victory like Laura did a couple of years ago."

Can Waters also become number one? It is a very tough ask. But she has answered the toughest challenge of her career so far, the questioning of her ability to come back, so it should not be ruled out.

And there is a precedent. "Nick Matthew and I exchanged a couple of text messages," Waters said. "I knew what Nick had been through and it helped me.

"He came back and became number one," she said. "And that's what I want to do too. I believe it is possible."



Paul Carter gives advice to Alison Waters at the National Championships