

Gaultier keeps his cool

In an exclusive interview with Rod Gilmour, world no.1 Greg Gaultier talks about his eventful career and how his British Open win has fired him up for another tilt at the world title

“

Upon the heat and flame
of thy distemper sprinkle
cool patience

”

There could be no more appropriate summary of Gregory Gaultier's career than this famous quote from William Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Over a 15-year career in which he has lost four world finals, held five match-balls to win a world title, harangued referees and often failed to stem his temper, the Frenchman has finally admitted to finding inner calm.

“I have spoken with lots of people, coaches and mental coaches, and I know I can remain calm and play really well,” says Gaultier. “I know after so many years where my weak point is. I understand how to deal with it now, although it would have been better to have dealt with it earlier.”

Gaultier sprinkled more than just cool Gallic patience on Nick Matthew at the British Open final in May, when he ended the season in scintillating style by winning the prestigious event for the second time to retain his world no.1 spot. The Englishman later described Gaultier “as a man possessed”.

“If I keep my head down and don't react to my surroundings, then that's best for me,” the Frenchman said of his outstanding victory in Hull.

Since breaking into the world's top 10 in 2006, Gaultier has been an ever-present at the back end of World Series events. In that time he has been world no.2 for two years and one month, finally overhauling Matthew in February this year to hold top spot for the second time.

The 31-year-old has looked stable and fluid on court, his free-flowing movement and calm shot-making proving a devastating combination.

Off court, he now has a son aged nearly two called Nolan with his partner, Veronica, the sister of Czech player Jan Koukal. The couple married in July in Prague, where Gaultier spends most of his time when not competing. “It was about time I settled down and moved on to another step in my life,” he explained.

Those first steps in squash were taken aged four. Gaultier's father had died of cancer a year earlier, his mother remarried “and made her life again”. Growing up in

northern France, the family built a four-court club in Audincourt, which Gaultier's mother managed for six years before deciding to sell at the right price.

He admits to a happy, loving childhood, though there were the obligatory lessons to be learned – as he recalled: “When you are young, you always want to experience and do stupid things; that is part of life. After a while you get punished and you know what to do.”

Alongside his squash, there was another passion: bikes. He remembers first riding one as a four-year-old, progressing up to motocross in his early teens.

“I had to decide, as it is a dangerous sport, and if you fall, you really injure yourself,” said Gaultier. “I could only ride my bike at the weekends, but I could play squash every day.

“When I first started, I wanted to go on court all the time, running 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.”

Gaultier trained in Audincourt until he was 13, travelling to Strasbourg every month to work under the auspices of Andre Delhoste, the former national coach, who saw his potential. He eventually moved to Aix-en-Provence, where a new national academy was being formed, with players like Stephane Galifi hailing from the region.

Gaultier recalled his first win at a small satellite event in Nimes in 1999. He was 17 and still at school, but he had banked his first 10 points on the PSA Tour. “That was the start for me,” he said.

Even then Gaultier reacted instantaneously to events on court. Those

who see him on tour, in the tournament hotel and after practice see a jovial, calm side to the Frenchman. It is the “injustice” on court that has hurt Gaultier the most.

“When you play, you see things differently to someone on the back wall,” he explained. “I have always reacted like that. I have struggled most of my career with it. When I was a kid, I wasn't quiet and wasn't perhaps the best-behaved, but you learn over time how to focus and be calm.”

That he was only 24 when he reached his first World Championship final is perhaps telling. Playing in an era when the likes of Australia's David Palmer and Egyptian Amr Shabana were ruling the roost, Gaultier managed to beat a host of top players to set up a showdown in Cairo with Palmer. The Frenchman marched into a 2/0 lead, but he lost in five, despite having held five match-balls.

“You train all your life to make your dream come true,” he reflects. “I was young and not really experienced in playing big finals. Of course it hurt. You can lose matches, but the way I lost was really disappointing. I was almost touching the trophy and for someone else to take it...” His words trail away.

Gaultier still has flashbacks today of that night in Cairo and his three subsequent world finals. “You try not to think about these moments, but sometimes they come back and I'm thinking ‘you should really have been world champion’,” he said.

“But you have to take the positive part. I played well in Egypt. It was my breakthrough. I was world no.8 and ended the year fourth. It was still a confidence boost, as I beat a lot of good players.”

Men's Open at a glance

Best match: Nick Matthew's gutsy, attritional victory against Mohamed Elshorbagy to reach his fourth British Open final.

Biggest upset: Qualifier Fares Dessouki's five-game, 62-minute win over no.8 seed Karim Darwish. It was fluid, unfazed and contained some clean ball-striking.

One to watch: Mathieu Castagnet - hard-working Frenchman, who has reinvented his game under national coach Renan Lavigne. Reached last eight and was rewarded with world top 20 ranking.

Best shot: Daryl Selby's overhead, backhand winner into the right corner nick

during his second-round defeat by Matthew. Sublime.

Fair play: Amr Shabana for twice giving points to opponents. His status was especially heightened when he told the referee it was a stroke after Greg Gaultier was granted a routine let in the quarter-finals.

Venue watch: British Open village enhanced its major tournament status. Dark lighting made for a vibrant atmosphere.

Summary: Great tournament, but will sponsor Dr Assem Allam sign another deal?

After losing to Matthew in his two most recent world finals, in 2011 and 2013, Gaultier has the utmost respect for the Briton. "You see how fit Nick is," he says. "It is incredible that he didn't lose a match for six months during his world no.1 rise. He puts so much energy into his work and he has deserved those world titles."

In those finals Gaultier failed to use his considerable talent when it mattered. His upright body and gliding movement wilted in Rotterdam and in the decider in Manchester. At the former he also reverted to type, losing in four after winning a disruptive opener.

"Sometimes you do everything you can to distract your opponent or see how he reacts," the Frenchman said. "You have to work things out to make him lose it a bit. Where I excel is when I don't talk to anybody and stick to a plan."

Does he regret his contretemps with the referees? "It's never been fun," he replies. "They are doing a job and it's not easy. It's something which has distracted me a lot and I have spent a lot of time thinking about it. That first World Championship, there were a lot of mistakes from the referees. When I watch it again, that is the toughest part."

Has he enjoyed the confrontations? "Not at all," he said. "It can play on your mind, but it is part of the job and you have to accept it."

"I am not trying to do anything, I just like to joke. Anyone who knows me will see I joke around with my friends. I say what I think, but of course I am a serious guy in what I do. I am not trying to do anything special. If it makes people laugh, then that's good. If something funny comes to mind, then I say it."

Gaultier admits that he has lost "so many finals" (he has won under half his 56 PSA Tour finals) that he has worked hard on "trying to finish the job". He knows that he is playing alongside some of the finest, fittest athletes the game has seen.

Yet Gaultier realises that he has to seize the moment. Shabana and Matthew are ageing, while Ramy Ashour has constant injury worries.

"I am still young," says a defiant Gaultier. "I remember people saying when I was 24 that I had years to win the world title. Where has time gone? But when I see Nick and Amr still going in their mid-30s, it's a good thing. I am closer to the end than the beginning, but if you really take care of yourself and be disciplined, you can still achieve."

"I guess I have two or three more years of great squash in me. I have won prestigious tournaments, but there is this thing missing. I would love to close the deal and become world champion once in my life."

There has surely never been a better chance for this recently-married, settled and supremely-gifted world no.1 to erase those past torments.

