

IN SEARCH OF GOLD

Rod Gilmour speaks to triple world champion Nick Matthew about the remaining targets in his glittering career

Fresh challenges are said to bring the best out of top players. And so it should be for Nick Matthew, version 2.0, who believes he has found his eureka moment as the great Briton aims to compete at the 2018 Commonwealth Games and bow out of the game with the Gold Coast sunshine on his back and gold around his neck.

That's the belief of a player who will be a few months shy of his 38th birthday when he bids to bag an incredible hat-trick of Commonwealth men's singles titles. If he does get that far – and he admits he is only assessing his career every quarter following recent injuries – then you can be sure that he will still look and play like someone several years younger.

“The emphasis now is on skills, tactical and mental elements” *Nick Matthew*

MATTHEW'S AIMS

2017

Compete in the World Championship in Manchester

2018

Compete in the Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast

It would be a fitting end, of course, to a brilliant career. But the PSA World Tour's statesman (he is the oldest player in the top 40 by three years) must first negotiate two seasons of full-throttle squash, which also includes another aim: the 2017 PSA Men's World Championship in Manchester.

"These are two things on the horizon that really inspire me," says Matthew. "Both of them feel quite a long way off. When I was injured, it served a purpose to think about those, to do all the right things to help me get there and to try and do what no one else has done before."

By his own admission, Matthew hasn't had an off season for the past two years due to the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and injuries, the most recent being a long-term ankle problem sustained at the 2015 EL Gouna International.

Ahead of his two tilts Stateside at the NetSuite and U.S. Opens, he says: "If I was going to have any longevity in the game, then I was going to need an off-season training period and consistency.

"In the season and the weeks in between events you can't make up the gaps you feel are existing and the focus has been on that."

So the Yorkshireman set about changing the way he has approached the sport and maintained a top-five world ranking since 2009.

Apart from on court, Matthew does no impact work and no running. Instead, he does bike, swimming and rowing sessions, and now hits only four times per week on court.

"Longevity is the key word – but I don't want to have longevity at no.40 in the world," he says. "I still want to get the balance between being competitive and not pushing myself too far. It's like I have been reinventing myself as a player.

"The training has been the easy bit: doing less and more sensibly. The hard part has been transferring it onto the court."

However, with the season now in full swing, it was only in the last throes of his summer training that Matthew hit upon his light-bulb moment.

"It has only dawned on me that because I have trained differently, perhaps I should play differently to match that," he says.

"Emphasis is now on the skills, tactical and mental elements of the game. For the last few years I have been fortunate enough to get into the position that 90 per cent of the

people I play, I could play to my strengths. On a good day, that would be enough.

"You look at it now and I'm not going to be the most physically strong player out there, simply due to the law of averages. I need to figure out what my strengths are."

Since Amr Shabana retired, Matthew now sees himself with a unique hand to play, namely that "there is no one out there with as good tactical play or as much experience. I need to start playing to that."

He adds: "There will still be aspects of my style in how I play, but the tactical knowhow needs to come to the forefront, using my brain and really adapting. I'm glad I finally figured that out.

"It has brought out a new enjoyment. It has triggered the brain to problem-solve, instead of going on autopilot, if you're not careful."

Matthew admits that the PSA World Series Finals were "a bit of an eye-opener" in this regard. He says it was an "intense" period readying himself for the Dubai event, following his second-round exit at the Allam British Open, the first time he had been beaten at that stage in a World Tour event for five years.

"I went out there playing how I've always played. I didn't have the summer behind me, but I was getting tired playing Mathieu Castagnet and Mohamed ElShorbagy. It wasn't a position I have been in, where you are slowing down and really hanging on. Usually, I've had that effect on my opponents, not myself! It was a total role reversal."

The old adage of 'under pressure, revert to type' rang true for Matthew. Now, he says, the challenge is when to change the pace and when to be technical, though these are two aspects that Matthew is figuring out with this month's PSA Men's World Championship in Cairo on the horizon. So to that eureka moment, which came during his traditional two-week training stint with former team-mate and pal Alister Walker at Williams College, Massachusetts, a venue where the three-time world champion has travelled to since 2007.

"The court was hot and bouncy, it was 90 degrees and I was thinking 'I've had a full summer and I'm breathing out of my rear end - why is that?'" Matthew said.

He sided with a comment made by LJ Anjema, the 33-year-old Dutch player who retired in June. "LJ said that 'you could only bash your head against a brick wall so much'. I needed to find a way around the wall, rather than go through it," he explained.

Thus, Matthew counts the USA trip as "two very important weeks", more so now that he is a father, has his own squash academy in Yorkshire and is setting himself up for the future.

"Life gets busy, in a good way," he says. "Maybe squash isn't the no.1 focus. It is when you're training, but it's not every day now.

"But at Williams College you get your head down and it's all about you. And you carry that momentum through when you get home."

A typical day would see Matthew rise at 6.30am for a physical session, either on the bike or a swim in the 50m pool. He might coach from 9-12pm and in the afternoon go for a swim (one day easy, the next day hard), before going on court from 4-6pm, with Wednesday off due to his new regime of four court sessions per week.

In the evening he would stretch, use the foam roller and watch the Olympics. "It was like how it was when you were younger, when squash was the be-all and end-all," he said.

Refreshed and revitalised, Matthew is ready for the stampede of tournaments before Christmas, albeit with a soft schedule.

He now admits that thinking of those two big pinnacle events in 2017 and 2018 when he was out injured was "demotivating" - and is instead finding the happy medium. "It's about reassessing at Christmas, then at Easter and so on," he says. "Hopefully, it will get me that longevity to those two big events.

"It's got to the point where 'what will be, will be'. I don't have to prove myself to anyone. I couldn't handle not being successful last year. I'd rather go out at no.4 in the world rather than being healthy and losing.

"If the body's healthy and I have a few more losses than normal, I'll keep working hard to get past that. That's the nature of the beast."