

# The American prodigy

Harvard graduate Amanda Sobhy speaks to James Zug about crashing the world top 10

In a definitive way Amanda Sobhy is proof that going to an American college can be beneficial for your career.

Sobhy's father, Khaled Sobhy, grew up in Cairo, won the Egyptian under-17 title in 1977, the U19 crown in 1979 and then reached world no.30. In 1985 he moved to North America, first to Toronto, then to a small club at Vail, the ski resort in Colorado, and finally to Long Island, where he worked at the Creek Club.

Amanda's older brother, Omar, got Khaled's squash attention early on, but after he left for Exeter and then George Washington University, Khaled turned to his 13-year-old middle daughter.

She was an inborn athlete—she started as a midfielder on her high school football team as a freshman—but was not instantly brilliant on the

squash court. In the first match at her first tournament the leftie almost got bagelled, losing 9-0, 9-0, 9-1. Her opponent that day was Olivia Blatchford, later her arch-rival in junior squash and now world no.34.

Under Khaled's tutelage, Sobhy quickly progressed and pointed higher than the ordinary American junior.

Aged 14, the moon-faced girl with the topknot started entering pro tournaments and every summer she trained in her father's old hometown. Hitting with singular conviction, she captured the 2010 World Junior Championship in Cologne, becoming just the third American to win a world singles title.

The long-term goal was clear: a pro career. In 2010, while only 16 and 17, she played events in 10 different countries.

So the ultimate dilemma for the hyphenated Sobhy after high school was does she become a full-time pro, like an Egyptian, or



does she go to college, like an American?

Sobhy went to Harvard University. At one level she smoothly navigated the collegiate and professional seas. Her world ranking was 21 when she arrived in September 2011 and 10 when she graduated this past May. In the best career in the century of American collegiate squash, she recorded a 64-0 mark in Harvard matches, winning 3/0 every time except for two occasions, when she dropped games to Trinity's Kanzy El Defrawy.

Yet it was not all plain sailing. College was her rumspringa, a way to distance herself from her childhood and explore who she is. She loved the social scene, especially early on. "When I came home for Thanksgiving in my freshman year, my trainer was shocked how out of shape I was," she said.

Her studies took a lot of her time (she majored in social anthropology, with a minor in global health). Squash-wise, she struggled to maintain her previous routines now that she had team practices (Sobhy's high school did not field a team). "I like structure and routine, and it was hard to find that early on," she said.

Mike Way, the Englishman who had mentored Jonathon Power, ran practices very differently to Khaled Sobhy.

"I grew up being a workhorse, being heavily pushed — my father was old-school and would keep working me until I couldn't go anymore," Sobhy said.

"Mike's a phenomenal coach, very good about technical things and the mental aspect of the game. He got me employing visualization in a serious way. But I'd come out of a long practice frustrated, because I had barely sweated."

She begged her parents to let her take a year off to play professionally, but they said no, knowing that if she left Harvard, she would never go back.

Instead, Sobhy cobbled together an inconsistent pattern — hitting with John Roberts, the young pro at the Harvard Club of Boston, and joining the Harvard men's team's practices. She also endured problems with her left foot, suffering stress fractures and strained ligaments.

She continued to play pro tournaments, but sometimes the schedule was burdensome. In March 2014 she had a tense 10-day marathon, where she took the national intercollegiate title and then swept the Granite Open in Toronto. The tail end was the U.S. Nationals, but, out of gas, she lost in the finals to her younger sister, Sabrina, who is now a freshman at Harvard.

Another time Amanda got up at 4am to catch a flight back from the Cleveland Classic and went straight to the Harvard courts for a 10am match against Cornell.

She faced Danielle Letourneau, a strong no.1 player (Letourneau is now world no.69) and was down 7-10 in the first. "I remember thinking 'Oh, this isn't going well,'" Sobhy said. "I was exhausted. Danielle's a good player. No one was watching — they all were thinking 'Oh, Amanda's fine.' And Danielle was playing well, like all the girls did — they had no pressure on them and would play free."

But Sobhy had no regrets. "Looking back, college was definitely the right decision," she says. "I learned how to handle pressure, with all the huge, loud crowds cheering."

“She has a hunger that is palpable”

At the start of her junior year former world no.1 Thierry Lincou moved to Boston to privately coach a family in Needham. Khaled Sobhy called him. "He told me 'Look, she can play, she is powerful, but mentally she is not strong enough,'" Lincou said.

The Frenchman began hitting with Sobhy each morning at Harvard. "I loved working with Thierry from the beginning," she said. "He had structured plans. I got my training in and then in the afternoon I could hit with the women's team, be a better team-mate, go to team dinners."

The feeling was mutual. "Basically, she had already adjusted to a different life, her first two years in college, finding her discipline, her lifestyle, nutrition," Lincou said.

"When we started, she was ready to become more professional. At first, she could only last a half hour at a high pace, so we worked on endurance, on her footwork and her movement.

"She needed variation; she could only play at one speed and wasn't able to adequately defend or change the pace. Her footwork needed to improve; she needed more balance, to be more nimble and quicker, so we worked on ghosting, ghosting in the right way, consistent, at match-speed.

"Everyone can move and hit when you have time, but at the highest level you don't have time; you have to take the ball early and you have to defend."

Today she and Lincou are working on her backhand. "She has the potential to

be world no.1," he said. "I want her backhand to be lethal. Everyone doesn't want to stay on her forehand. We need the same for her backhand, to be more severe on her shots and to be able to defend better."

Sobhy is revelling in the freedom of being a full-time professional with just one focus.

Khaled Sobhy is now more of a father than a coach. She said: "I told him 'Your role is now to be Dad. You can say how proud you are of me and what do you want for dinner?'"

Amanda's mother, Jodie Larson, is her manager, as they try to exploit the flurry of publicity surrounding the first American to break into the world's top 10.

Sobhy lives in the North End of Boston, the Italian enclave, with two housemates, but she is constantly on the move around the city.

She trains with Lincou at the six-court facility at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, where the Frenchman is now the men's coach.

In Back Bay she has regular hitting sessions with Shahid Zaman Khan at the Tennis & Racquet Club — all feeding and pressure drills — and gets on the hardball doubles courts at the University Club of Boston, where she is the official touring pro. She works out at Next Level Fitness in the North End.

"I am loving finally being able to properly train and focus," says Sobhy, who turns 23 in June. "I am no longer juggling a million things, writing a paper, handing in a problem set."

Her commitment is praised by Paul Assaiante, the U.S. national coach. "I'm such a fan of Amanda's," he said. "She must tell the truth—her world is black and white. She has a hunger that is palpable. You can't teach that."

Sobhy's life is not dominated by squash, though. She also loves singing. When she was younger, she sang in her school chorus and a madrigal choir, while at Harvard she was briefly in the Harvard-Radcliffe Chorus, the prestigious choir in Cambridge, and she did an independent music project in her senior spring. Now she is looking to join a community choir.

She also sang, with another Harvard squash alum (Hope Prockop, the current British Open over-45 champion), the national anthem before the finals of the 2015 Tournament of Champions.

Sobhy was unable to do that this year, though, because she was playing in the final after decisive upsets over Raneem El Welily and Alison Waters. It is a sacrifice she was happy to make.