

'THE OUTSTANDING BRITISH PLAYER OF HIS GENERATION'

Rod Gilmour looks back at the life of Scottish squash legend Mike Oddy, the former world no.2, who died in November aged 79

Mike Oddy will be remembered not only as an outstanding player during the 1960s, but also as a pre-cursor to the Jonah Barrington regime – the first to take squash seriously in terms of utter dedication towards fitness and winning tournaments.

Playing in an era with such Pakistan luminaries as Azam, Roshan and Mo Khan, and Aftab Jawaid, as well as Egyptian duo A.A. AbouTaleb and Ibrahim Amin, Oddy managed to become a consistent threat to these world-class players.

Despite playing with only one kidney, he won a raft of tournaments as he focused on the British Open and Amateur Championship played at the Lansdowne Club in London.

He achieved these results thanks to a steely resolve and by putting all his energy into the sport, the turning point coming when he decided to train and play on the hot, bouncy courts at New Grampians in Shepherd's Bush, the club owned by Azam.

Here he discovered the art of power driving to a length, which became a trademark of the Scot. "Single-minded and determined, Mike was the forerunner to the professional squash world as we know it today," recalls Mike Corby, a career-long team-mate of Oddy.

"He learnt much from Azam, who simply taught Mike the art of disciplined squash. He subsequently made very few errors and opponents had to win a point rather than being given an easy point.

“ His style was relentless length at a fast pace, getting to the ball early and creating pressure for all opponents ”

Standing at 6ft 2in, Oddy was light on his feet and well balanced. Observers seldom saw him penalised or lets given against

him. He relished the drive and thrived on the economy of his strokeplay.

After reaching the semi-finals of the prestigious British Amateur Championship in 1957, he made his breakthrough three years later by winning the tournament in consecutive years.

Then, in 1964, he finished runner-up to AbouTaleb at the British Open, the de facto world championship at the time, having ended the Pakistani dominance by ousting Mo Khan in the semi-finals. "His regime made him the outstanding British player of his generation," adds Corby.

Born in the Scottish Borders town of Hawick in 1937, Oddy joined Edinburgh Squash Club in the early 1950s, soon becoming Scottish junior champion. This was after he was told that he wouldn't be allowed to play rugby due to having only one kidney – a bitter blow for a Scot.

Undeterred, he threw himself into the non-contact sport of squash and became senior champion in 1956 at the age of 18, a title he was to garner four times.

During his five-year spell as British no.1 he won events in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa to be ranked second in the world.

His boundless enthusiasm saw him partake in endless tournaments, not least the long-running Frank Strawson Memorial Match, where Oddy lined up for the Squash Rackets Association men against a heavily-handicapped ladies team. Some team-mates had backed Australian Heather Blundell to beat him on handicap, which she narrowly did. The story goes that Oddy never forgot that match.

He was capped 37 times by Scotland in all, the highlight coming in 1964, when the Scots beat auld rivals England for the first time in 34 years. However, the same year he was forced to retire at the tender age of 27 due to ill health and work pressures.

Off court, he was very successful in business. After leaving Rugby School, Oddy, who never married, joined Ballantyne Knitwear. He then moved to Leicester – first playing for the city's squash club in 1957 – to become managing director of Pantherella Fine English Socks, taking the business public before retiring.

He was also a big follower of horse racing, primarily on the Flat. It is said that he never missed a King George Day at Ascot for 59 straight years and was therefore very pleased when, through his Royal Ascot Racing Club membership, he had a share in the Derby winner, Motivator, in 2005.

