

POSITIVITY PAYS FOR PERRY

British Open finalist Sarah-Jane Perry tells Rod Gilmour how she has silenced the doubters by marching into the world top 10

Being told that you will never make it as a top professional seems to be a recurring theme when it comes to exploring how England's leading women made a success of their careers.

Squash Player readers will be familiar with Laura Massaro's story in our first issue of the year after the Lancastrian revealed that her own career had been about "proving people wrong".

Massaro's team-mate, Sarah-Jane Perry, has been dealt the same hand on her own squash journey.

Yet England's no.2 has always turned these episodes into positives as she has progressed through the junior and university ranks, and her status elevated further when the explosive hitter secured her first season-ending trip to the PSA World Tour Finals in Dubai this summer.

"I don't begrudge people [their opinion] and I can see why they have thought it," says Perry of her early detractors. "I've kept plugging away. I've never been upset by it. I've seen it as ammunition to work harder and prove people wrong.

"You can see it with Laura as well - it creates that mental toughness and we aren't offended easily. We are there to show that we are doing what we do to the best of our abilities. It is an extra thing to show people who have doubted me in the process. It's not the main aim, but it's a nice bonus if I am playing well."

Rather than being hindered by outside sources, she puts where she is today down to two simple factors: her parents and her first coach.

"My parents were proud of me however I tried," she said. "If I lost, they were the first to give the other credit and for me it was a case of working harder and beating them next time.

"It was important that they didn't put expectations on me and they still don't now. If I had a bad day, my mum would say 'don't worry, I still love you!' Meanwhile,

the coach is there to be a bit critical when they need to be, but it's also nice to have the support from friends who are in my corner and my corner only."

That coach was Steve Townsend, a former England Squash Club Coach of the Year. The pair were together for 15 years until a change of direction in the last two years saw her first work with former national champion Sue Wright and then, earlier this year, she switched to the Rob Owen Academy in between the Tournament of Champions and the British National Championships.

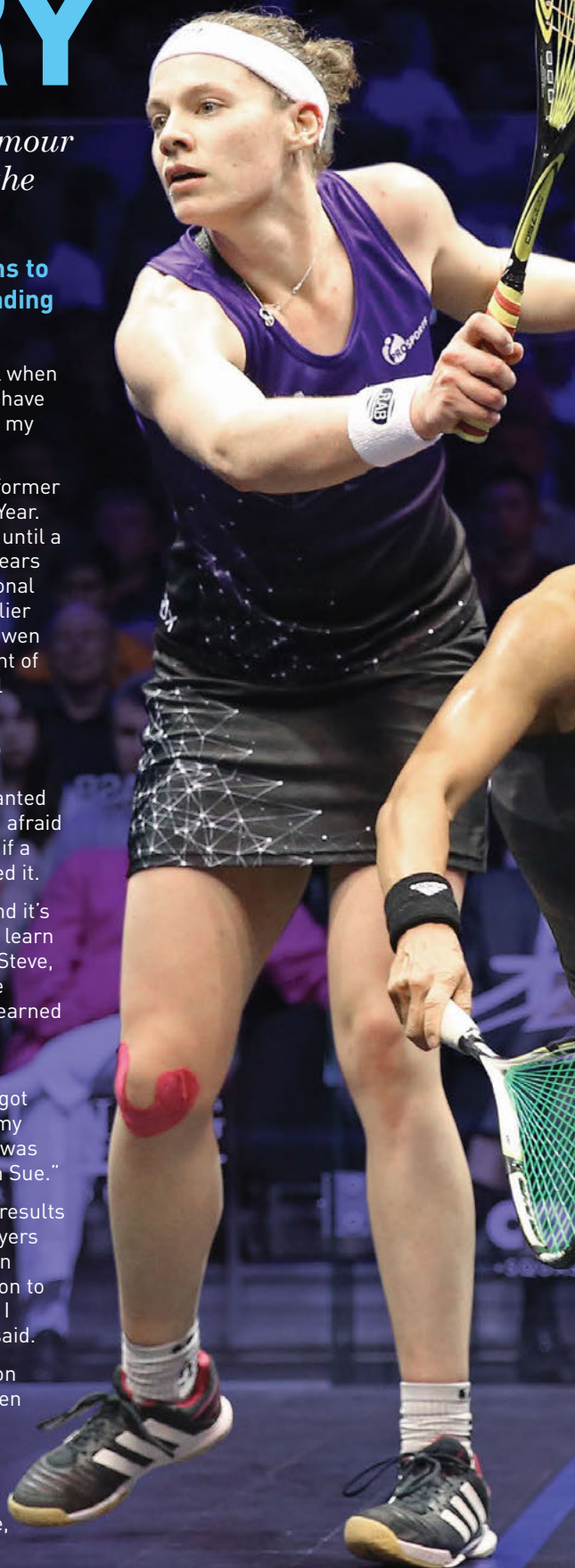
"A lot of my squash basis is down to Steve," admits Perry. "He never discouraged me once from how I wanted to play, with my skills and not being afraid of being creative. It's difficult to tell if a shot is on or not unless you've played it.

"Steve always instilled that in me and it's something juniors these days could learn from. It came to a natural end with Steve, but I wanted to build on the massive wealth of squash knowledge I had learned from him."

With Wright (now Sue Rose), Perry adopted a different approach. "She got me thinking and using my skills to my advantage," said the world no.7. "It was an important year for me being with Sue."

Perry was then impressed with the results of Owen's current crop of young players out of the West Warwickshire Club in Solihull. "It wasn't an instant decision to work with Rob, but for my next step I thought he would be the guy," she said.

Whatever the direction or decision on or off court, Perry's mindset has been to accentuate the positives from all situations. At university she learned about "life, making friends and getting on with people even if you haven't much in common. Otherwise, it could be a lonely place."





She adds: "I respect where everyone has come from and the challenges they've faced. I admire Laura for what she has been through and how she's got to the top. I'm interested in hearing all people's stories really."

While still a student, Perry had a knee operation, an episode which held her back from giving everything to squash. She focused on her engineering and business degree, and thanks to subsequent strength and conditioning coaches, she was able to rehabilitate back to elite level.

She has suffered a back injury and torn vertebrae in the last five years, but since 2012 (when she won three titles to thrust herself into the world's top 30) she has been marked out by some leading players as a future top-five player.

Her 2015 national title win underlined that, as did her quarter-final victory over Nicol David at last September's Al-Ahram International.

By forcing her opponents to twist and turn, and to keep guessing, the essence of her game still remains. She says: "My strengths are my ability to change the direction of my shots and use my wrist while still keeping a solid game overall. It's not just about having a plan A, but B, C and D too, so if that's not going to plan, then I can be very difficult to beat. This has been the difference over the last 18 months."

Perry's belief that she could mix it with the world's top 10 on a consistent basis first came to light in the French League finals last summer against Camille Serme, who heads to Dubai as the leading women's qualifier.

"I knew she had beaten me nine times since juniors," recalls Perry. "In my head I said that no one is beating me 10 times. I won and it was almost like I had decided to win that match. I went on with a slightly different level of confidence and it was a little revelation for me. It wasn't the best match I'd played, but it was one for the bank."

She is now standing among the world's best and racking up the caps for England in the process.

"I'm not close to retiring," she quipped.

"We're looking good for the future, with three of our team well under 30."

As for playing on the glass court at Dubai Opera in June, few could have predicted Perry reaching the World Series Finals a few years ago, all bar Perry herself.

She admits: "Even Rob was very honest with me. One of the things he started off by saying when he started coaching was that he didn't have me down as one of the players to watch a few years ago."

That's not the case anymore. "No stage overawes me now," she says. Not even Dubai.

SHORT SHOTS

Age: 27 (DOB: 15/5/90)

Lives: Kenilworth, Warwickshire

World ranking: 7 (May 2017)

Club: Kenilworth

Coach: Rob Owen

Racket: Prince

Strings: RAB Sensor Fibre

Clothing: iPro Sport

Socks: TruSox

Other sponsors: Bespoke Office Space Solutions



PSA DUBAI WORLD SERIES FINALS

WHERE: Dubai Opera. The staging of the season-ending event at the stunning £260million, 2,000-seater arts complex, which opened last November, is set to supersede any other venue in the history of the sport.

WHEN: June 6-10.

WHO: The top eight players from the men's and women's PSA World Series Standings apart from Amanda Sobhy, who is injured and replaced by Alison Waters.
Men – Karim Abdel Gawad (Egy), Greg Gaultier (Fra), Mohamed ElShorbagy (Egy), Marwan ElShorbagy (Egy), Nick Matthew (Eng), James Willstrop (Eng), Simon Rösner (Ger), Ramy Ashour (Egy).

Women – Camille Serme (Fra), Nour El Sherbini (Egy), Laura Massaro (Eng), Raneem El Welily (Egy), Nouran Gohar (Egy), Nicol David (Mas), Sarah-Jane Perry (Eng), Alison Waters (Eng).

PRIZE MONEY: £160,000

TICKETS: www.worldseriesfinals.com.

PSA WORLD SERIES EVENT WINNERS

Hong Kong Open: Ramy Ashour (Egy) and Nouran Gohar (Egy)

U.S. Open: Mohamed ElShorbagy (Egy) and Camille Serme (Fra)

Qatar Classic: Karim Abdel Gawad (Egy)

Tournament of Champions: Gawad and Serme

Windy City Open: Greg Gaultier (Fra) and Raneem El Welily (Egy)

British Open: Gaultier and Laura Massaro (Eng)

El Gouna International: Gaultier

Sarah-Jane Perry (left) on her way to victory over eight-time world champion Nicol David in the British Open semi-finals