

# DESTINED FOR GREATNESS

*Richard Eaton meets England's rising star Gina Kennedy and her coach Ben Ford, who tips his protégé for world no. 1*

**Squash wasn't even Gina Kennedy's first choice sport – then when she belatedly committed herself to starting a PSA Tour career, she found it delayed by more than a year.**

So it was like lightning from a clear blue sky when, within a few months of starting out as a professional, there was talk of her becoming world number one.

But then a great deal about Kennedy is improbable. Her commitment to professional squash happened only after forays into football and athletics (she was a winner of the London mini-marathon) and after four years at Harvard University.

When at last she was ready for launch on the circuit it was aborted by the pandemic. Even her eventual restart, in June last year, offered no hint of how rapidly she would climb from 164 in the world. As recently as October she was still outside the top 50.

Her movement and focus were exceptional, but her game wasn't bursting with creative threats and her technical skills were still evolving.

There were certainly clues as to what might happen, but only those who saw her in training would be aware of them. She was disciplined, conscientious and had a huge capacity for learning. As the year drew to a close, Kennedy was suddenly hurtling into the top 20 with wins over three top ten players.

***This stirred her coach Ben Ford into predictions which might previously have sounded like fantasy. Before Kennedy's ascent into the top 10 in February, he asserted: "I'm 100 per cent sure she can become number one - and she can do it in 18 months. She will be top five fairly soon."***

What triggered this seismic shift of perspective? In almost 40 years of the women's tour only three English players have become world no. 1. How did Kennedy possess qualities that hadn't been noticed?

Partly because she had had a very physical game and it required closer inspection to observe how she had been working on variety and adaptability in her game. But Ford sensed the potential that her industry and ambition might be unlocking.

"Gina's only at the beginning of what she's capable of," he reckoned. "Once she made up her mind squash was what she



wanted, I made it clear what she should be doing – and she always did it.

"It isn't what players do with me; it's what they do without me which really matters. I'd work on something with Gina on a Monday and in the afternoon she would send videos of herself practising it. But I would see someone else and know they hadn't been practising it!

***"This is the biggest difference between her and others I coached. There were better players than Gina, but none of them had her attitude."***

Sure enough, early in October she overcame Rowan Elaraby, the world no.10 from Egypt, at the US Open in Philadelphia, and later that month beat world no.8 Joelle King at the DAC Pro Classic in Detroit. In December's Black Ball Open in Cairo, Kennedy first beat her English compatriot Sarah-Jane Perry, the world no.5, before advancing to a first semi-final in a gold status tournament.

Just after our interview, she reached yet further heights by taking the Cleveland Classic title via accomplished victories over US Open semi-finalist Olivia Fiechter, second seed Joshna Chinappa and Perry, again, in the final. It may be worth noting that Perry, King and Chinappa will be among her main rivals for gold at this summer's Commonwealth Games – and she has just beaten them all.

Kennedy maintains a controlled perspective. "I'm so fresh to the

tour," she said. "I've only been doing this a few months. I've had some good wins but know my progress won't always be quite as linear as it has so far."

She was aware that top-level success required the development of further skills – an ability to adapt to the sometimes slower speed of balls on all-glass courts, and an injection of variety in her game, as well as resilience in dealing with fiercer emotional demands of big occasions.

This was quite a task. Successes as a junior had sometimes been accompanied by feelings of anxiety. "I felt so much pressure, I was just so desperate to win," said the 24-year-old from Kent. Ford sometimes described the combination of her playing style and state of mind as "frenetic".

But she has some remedies. At Harvard she was encouraged to view squash as a team pursuit, suppressing the fierce demands of the ego. The coach Mike Way described this as "stress with solutions", something Kennedy embraced. "It taught me how to be tougher mentally," she said. "I knew this would help me if I decided on a pro career."

She has drawn stability from the 13-year working relationship with Ford, whom she first met aged 11. "Straightaway she was different from anyone else," he recalls. "She asked lots of questions. She wanted to improve. And she was clearly very fit and strong and could really get around the court."

Initially however there was limited evidence

that Kennedy might make squash her livelihood. She played for

Crystal Palace and Charlton Athletic age group football teams and was a very promising athlete, clocking great 1500m and 5000m times with Blackheath and Bromley Harriers.

It was with Ford's influence that she eventually prioritised squash. "She always did what she was asked to do," he emphasised. "She has never not turned up or not given a hundred percent. And we were always honest with each other."

She has had valuable input from coaches at Harvard and England Squash and may bring in new people in future, especially a physio. "But for me, the relationship I have with Ben is part of the reason I have been so successful," she emphasised. "I know him. I trust what he says. I am lucky I have him".

The lockdown of 2020-21 appears not only to have enhanced their relationship but unexpectedly contributed to Kennedy's great leap forward.

"Initially I thought I was very unlucky," she says of the start to her full-time career being cruelly obstructed. "But with hindsight I was fortunate. It gave me a chance to spend a full year working on my game two or three times a week.

"I don't think my game would have progressed the way it has [without that]. I was able to do all that training and make all those adaptations. I only realised

this a while after I started competing again. I didn't have a sense of what my level was becoming."

That happened when at last she came to play big tournaments. Her confidence grew quickly. "The way the year panned out couldn't have been better," she said. "It was very exciting how much my game was progressing."

It has given her a great lift, but the need for changes remains. Though she has empathised with the brilliantly athletic Nicol David, squash's longest-lasting world no.1, such great physicality can sometimes be a mixed blessing in the more creative modern game.

Kennedy wants to be taking charge of rallies more often. To do this she has been working on technical aspects of her game, "and I need to keep doing that," she says.

***"You need a B game," she emphasises. "You need to control the game and this is something I've been working on. If you are physically good, sometimes you can guts it out. But squash is not just physical."***

So Gina is discovering an extra dimension. She is aiming for new possibilities, for ways of transporting her game into new realms. An emotional portal may also have to be found; one leading from obscurity to fame.

