



PIN-POINT ACCURACY

Hugely popular BBC News presenter Ros Atkins tells Rod Gilmour about efforts to translate his laser-like broadcasting style to the squash court

"I love the way today's professionals are doing things which at my level simply don't work, like the attacking smash nick," says Ros Atkins, the BBC presenter who has made a name for himself in his own trade with equal precision.

"I could practise that 50 times in a row and get one if I am lucky. I can't believe they have made something so extraordinary so normal in the game."

Atkins is described as the BBC's 'explainer in chief'. His crisp, forensic and scrupulously impartial analysis of UK and world events – including bitesize viral monologues on Donald Trump, Brexit and Boris Johnson's 'Partygate' controversy – have earned him millions of views on social media and wide praise.

Atkins has been at the BBC for over 20 years, working his way up from being a producer on the Simon Mayo Show on Radio Five Live to presenter of BBC News' *Outside Source* programme.

He's also a self-confessed squash nut. His father, a fisherman, was a keen player, influenced by Jonah

Barrington who played close to the Atkins' family home in Falmouth, Cornwall.

Using his first racket, a pentagon-shaped Browning, Atkins Jnr played a school friend, Mark, for half an hour every lunchtime on their secondary school's court for years. No-one else ever played them and they never had a coaching session.

"I played him hundreds of times," recalls Atkins, "and he was slightly better than me which is a good thing in squash as it makes you improve."

"I was hugely enthusiastic, but unlike cricket where I was getting lots of coaching and aiming for the Cornwall schoolboys' team, squash remained something I played for the sheer thrill and experience."

When he went to Cambridge University, the nearest squash court was 300 metres from his bedroom, but his lack of coaching meant he didn't try for the university side. "I had a headless chicken approach to running around and my technique wasn't as good as it should be," says Atkins, now married with two daughters.

After returning from a knee injury last year, Atkins paid for a coach for the first time in his life, aged 47, at Dulwich Squash Club in south east London. A lightbulb moment came when he found himself in constant motion when striking the ball, either falling away or moving towards the wall depending on the nature of the shot. Will Nicholson, his coach, told him he should be arriving at the ball to set himself up for the shot. He is now enthralled at watching how current professionals carry it off.

Given that his viral BBC clips dominate social media, it is natural to ask him about the PSA World Tour's own media output. "When you watch a sport you play and see the players do it exceptionally well, the thought is, 'how on earth have they done that?'" he says.

"The clips with the highest impact combine the skill of players, great atmosphere and location. Those are the ones that give me a tingle and I think of the sport's possibilities."

BBC impartiality prevents Atkins from fully dissecting squash's continued Olympic omission, though he realises how much the issue affects people.

"The Olympics won't instantly transform the sport unless other things are put in place alongside it. But as a squash consumer, the game has really transformed what it can offer me in the last 15 years; live coverage, SquashTV, clips, experiences at events. The sport is benefiting."

There are, he says, deep questions to be asked about people being able to access the sport. Atkins recently went back to his old university where two courts had been repurposed for gym spaces.

"Outside squash and the ability to place

courts where you wouldn't normally find them is worth exploring," he believes.

"I remember being on Venice Beach a few years ago and seeing a version of squash with walls on three sides. There may be possibilities for squash to experiment and use public areas like this.

"It feels like squash has gone through something of a transformation but sports such as padel have shown there are ways to situate sports [more strategically]."

His own hours on court have been scuppered after he tore his meniscus at the start of the pandemic. Bouts of recovery and relapses led Atkins to undergo knee surgery recently, but he has no intention of stopping.

The Cornishman, who boasts a decent retrieval game, says he is taking inspiration from how Paul Coll adapted his game to become more precise as he rose to world no.1. "In my own, far less successful way, I'm trying to make my game about accuracy and control. Well, that's the plan anyway," he smiles.

Squash, he adds, is great for blowing away the cobwebs, given that he works in a fast-paced newsroom environment. "We have two girls and as my job became more demanding, cricket was hard to keep up. I have loved the fact that you can walk off court after 45 minutes and be completely spent. It's an efficient way to keep fit. I love the intensity and its different demands."

With the job, Atkins has played in outposts such as the Falklands Islands, Nairobi, Uganda, Johannesburg, New York, California and the National Squash Centre in Delhi. "You can always find a court if you look close enough," he says. "I always try to get a game with someone



Atkins with Mike Kawooya

wherever I am. It's lovely to be playing a game familiar to you that sounds, smells or plays differently."

This included one memorable session in Ugandan capital Kampala. He found an opponent, Mike Kawooya, only to discover during warm-up small talk that he was the Ugandan no.1 and had just returned from the Commonwealth Games. Atkins was in a long line of players who were being dispatched throughout the evening.

"The court had a roof but it wasn't connected to the wall," he remembers. "The fresh evening air flowed on to the court. I thought 'Wow, this is lovely and perhaps the sport could do more here.' If the sport can create more of those facilities outdoors it really would be exciting."

One of Atkins' daughters has now taken up the sport and together they went to this year's Canary Wharf Classic final.

"That intimacy and the connection between the fans is one of the special things about squash," he says of the compact East Wintergarden venue. "You can see the best players up close and that is a really great thing the sport can offer. Even if the sport got wildly more successful, I would always want squash to hold on to that."

MY FAVOURITE PLAYER

"Watching Hesham for the first time live at Canary Wharf was a big thrill. I've always favoured, for better or worse, high risk drop shots from the back of the court and have practised them a lot over the years. If you are creaking on the fitness front, playing that shot ends the rally one way or another!

"I love the way that Mazen attacks where you wouldn't expect a player to do so. He does the triple boast nick that no one else can, and attacks aggressively when he is right at the back. It requires a huge degree of skill, using side and backspin to get the ball to die.

"Someone so creative who can use that to flourish so well is a great sign for the sport, where players can be so different and they are all able to get into the world's top 10."

