

West is best for Shorbagy

Rod Gilmour talks to surprise World Championship runner-up Mohamed El Shorbagy about his stunning Doha displays and how the Egyptian has found an ideal base in the West Country

Mohamed El Shorbagy wasn't always destined to grace a squash court. The slim Egyptian had to swim continual lengths as a youth, until his racket skills were deemed good enough for him to concentrate on squash. The thought of it!

"I hated swimming," he says. "It was my mother who forced me to do it every day. Luckily, when I won the under-11 nationals (squash), she realised there was no way back. I have a tough mother!"

Tough, yes, but fortunately Mrs Shorbagy realised how talented her son was and now, 11 years on, the 22-year-old older brother of world junior champion Marwan is talking about about his sensational week in Doha, Qatar.

There, in December, he carved his way through the World Championship draw to finish runner-up behind Ramy Ashour. The world top-10 regular from Alexandria suddenly found the formula to get within three points of lifting the title.

Shorbagy's build-up to Doha was far from ideal, though. He fell ill in Hong Kong, seemingly leaving his Qatar hopes in tatters. That in turn led to anger towards the Professional Squash Association for scheduling two major tournaments a week apart. "I knew I couldn't peak in HK and then in Doha. I just wasn't happy that they were so close together. It wasn't right for the PSA to do that," he said.

Shorbagy's form still gave him a good chance in Doha, but his hopes hinged on a last-eight meeting with compatriot Karim Darwish. "I already had a win against Darwish and I got close to him twice last year," he recalled. "Matches with him have always been close and whoever won that match was going to be so tired the next day. So I had to plan it really well and make sure my tournament didn't just stop against James Willstrop."

Shorbagy ran out a 3/0 winner,

although he stressed: "It was mighty close." Nevertheless, the shortness of the Darwish match saved the Egyptian's energy and was a significant factor in his thrilling 3/2 victory over Willstrop in the semi-final.

So how did Shorbagy manage to defeat two such experienced players? The previous problem, he says, was that every time he saw an opponent tire, Shorbagy went off the boil. He would say to himself: "I've got you now".

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"Darwish has such good hands that he can go for his shots and the match could have slowly slipped away from me," he revealed. "So I tried not to look at his face, not even for a second. I would look at my brother for motivation."

Contrast that with his comments on the Willstrop match. "I was completely dead and cramping all over. At 2/1 up in games and 4-1 up, I couldn't push anymore. I said to myself 'You're acting like a girl. You have to push it.' In the fifth game I looked at James' face and it kept me going."

When Shorbagy woke up the next morning, though, his body wouldn't respond. His mindset – he was now facing a final against Ashour – was shot, too. The routine was still there, so the two Shorbagys went for their usual morning hit. However, Marwan could sense a shift in momentum and not even brotherly love could lift Mohamed, so they cut short the practice.

"I had a feeling this was going to be the worst final in world history, that I was going to lose in 20 minutes," Shorbagy recalled. "I kept thinking my head is tired, I can't do anything. But my brother said: 'You can't talk like that. How many people wish they were playing the final today instead of you?' From then on, everything turned on its head."

Though the two had never met competitively, Shorbagy had a plan for Ashour, but he still had to combat the world no.1's dazzling attacks and change of pace. At first, he couldn't defend against Ashour's shot-making. But his length increased and suddenly Shorbagy found himself with a lead in the fifth – after a brilliant rally in the fourth that will surely go down as one of the finest in recent times – before Ashour found enough resolve to become a double world champion.

Everyone congratulated Shorbagy afterwards on his tournament, but, a month on, those three points still rankle. "I had never lost a junior British or world final," he says. "I would have preferred losing to Willstrop than how I went down in the world final. I never imagined I would take Ramy to five."

There are few things in sport as thrilling as seeing rare talent emerge like this. The possibility of potential and a seismic shot in the arm for the sport fluctuate through the mind. In recent years there has been the

rise of Ashour. That has now been followed by Shorbagy's emergence.

Mentored by the great Jonah Barrington since he was 15, Shorbagy rose to prominence in 2008 at the World Open in Manchester, becoming



the first qualifier for 22 years to reach the quarter-finals when he beat compatriot Hisham Ashour. There was even talk of the then 17-year-old breaking Jansher Khan's record of holding both the world junior and senior titles in the same year, before Amr Shabana proved a step too far.

The path to his finding Barrington is an intriguing story too – one that has ended up with half the Shorbagy family moving to the West Country. It is certainly a far cry from that swimming pool at the Smouha Sporting Club in Alexandria.

It wasn't until Shorbagy started playing squash, aged 10, that life began to change, though. Although his uncle was an amateur squash player at the club, Shorbagy's love for the game had yet to flourish until he came across the best player to come out of Alexandria, former pro Gamal Awad, who was coaching at the club for a month.

He saw Shorbagy play for 20 minutes and was so impressed that he asked the club if he could take Shorbagy under his wing for the next month. That period stretched to the next three years as Awad, who contested the longest match of all time with Jahangir Khan (two hours 46 minutes in 1983), concentrated on Shorbagy.

It was during one Ramadan, however, that life took another turn for Shorbagy. The two had spoken on the phone late one night, but an hour later, at 3am, Awad died of a heart attack. The first two people his wife called were Shorbagy's parents.

"He put all the strong basics into me from an early age, not squash tactics, but personality and how to push and beat any player of any age," Shorbagy recalled. "You have two hands, two legs, so what else do you need to beat people? he used to say to me."

To train with Awad, Shorbagy continues, was to enter his private life, too: "He used to have lots of fights with his wife and I knew everything there was to know. He was the person who taught me everything, until I went to Jonah."

Most squash observers will also know how tight-knit the Shorbagy family is. Mother and father, who reside in Saudi Arabia, travel to most of the major tournaments. After all, they have invested so much.

"My mother always tries to find the best in everything," says Shorbagy. "My

father was one that if he had £100 left in the bank and we needed that for squash, he would pay for that."

According to Shorbagy, his mother never missed a training session when he was growing up: "She was hard at the right times, soft during tournaments. She knew how to deal with me really well.

"Would you ever find a mother who has watched matches on Squash TV on future opponents and then passed on advice and tips on how to beat them?"

After Awad died, there was a period when Shorbagy travelled to Cairo and worked under different coaches. It didn't work and, anyway, Shorbagy says he is the kind of player who shouldn't be mixing and training with fellow players. "I shouldn't be that open. Training should be your secret and I think this is the right way," he reasoned.

Then came the World Open in 2006. Shorbagy's mother pushed him to speak

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to players to play with him, but he was too shy and didn't succeed.

However, he did hit it off with one player, Joey Barrington, by telling him he was at French school in Alexandria and had won the British juniors. One week later he found himself being offered a scholarship to Millfield School, where he would come under the tutelage of Joey's father. It was a whirlwind period, with the whole family moving over to Britain where they rented a flat two minutes from the school.

Crucially, Barrington didn't try to change Shorbagy's game. He improved his Egyptian game and then morphed the English style into it, the mantra being that patience and accurate length are crucial if the flair part is malfunctioning.

"He understands me mentally, just by the sound of my voice," Shorbagy said. "I am still learning and it is an unfinished experience for me. He is like my second father and just by playing under his name has given me loads of confidence."



Mohamed El Shorbagy with his devoted parents

Six years on and both brothers are now living in Bristol, thanks to scholarships at the West of England University. Their flat is a minute's walk from the gym, track and physios, while local coach Hadrian Stiff is also on hand. Shorbagy describes the conditions as "just perfect".

Sometimes the brothers will go back to Millfield to spend the weekend with Barrington senior. They are enjoying it so much that they are house-hunting. They have connected with Bristol's cultural life. There are concerts to attend and friends to go out with at the weekend. They don't really drink, so the enjoyment comes from music. Shorbagy admits that "a really late night is 2am after a little dance".

It is a far cry from those claustrophobic days in Egypt. I then ask Shorbagy if there are any other memories. He pauses, then raises a smile. "I had a lot of fights with the then Egyptian Federation," he says, who were against him travelling to England.

He will never forget one tournament in the Cairo suburb of Heliopolis, one that best highlights Shorbagy's combative streak and why there is currently a never-ending production line of young Egyptians, who can fight and soak up pressure in equal measure.

"When I was 11 or 12, I remember three Cairo clubs would come to support their player against me," he recalled. "There must have been 200 people there and only my brother in my corner. I won 9-6 in the fifth. I used to get a lot of joy by going there and beating a Heliopolis player in his home camp. It has made me stronger today. I used to love it, really love it!"

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