

# Star of India

Richard Eaton talks to Saurav Ghosal about becoming the first Indian to reach the World Championship quarter-finals and why he feels the best is yet to come

It was Sachin Tendulkar's penultimate Test match and although Eden Gardens was packed with people wanting to pay homage to the cricketer described as India's greatest sportsman, some of them still came up to congratulate the watching Saurav Ghosal.

The praise may be prescient. Besides suggesting that Ghosal's achievement in becoming the first Indian to reach the quarter-finals of the World Championship has been percolating into India's national consciousness, it emphasised – against the background of such a mighty occasion – how great can be the rewards for a successful sportsman in the world's largest democracy.

This helps the man from Kolkata to think that the best is still to come and encourages others to believe he has the drive and self-confidence to achieve it.

"Not only must I keep doing it, I must keep doing it better, but it won't happen overnight," Ghosal said. "I have to make a sustained effort to make another

challenge and to make squash bigger in India."

It is easy to be fascinated not only by the speed, grace and intelligence of a fine talent, but also by the possibilities to which he referred.

India has a good junior programme, a woman (Dipika Pallikal) who has recently been in the world's top 10 and the potential for larger sums of money to become available. Further success might galvanise not just a massive nation, but the PSA Tour worldwide.

"I am just 27, not super-young, but there are still a good few years left in me," Ghosal assessed. "And hopefully I will do very well."

His words betrayed a hint of doubt, but one person who sounds more certain is Ghosal's long-time coach, Malcolm Willstrop.

"I have always said that Saurav is a top-10 player but that I have not got him there yet," he said.

There are two reasons why the best may indeed be yet to come. Though it has taken several years, Ghosal now knows much better what he is good at. This understanding has made him better-placed to deal with the barriers which, according to Willstrop, now face him.

The principal one involves not adopting the most aggressive psychology. Willstrop claims Ghosal always gives other players full respect, but he stresses: "You have to give yourself a chance of winning as well."



"Saurav is a very fine player. He has short legs, but he's quick. He's very quick, very nimble, pacey, strong, fit and agile. His racket skills are far more developed now as well and he can play in most areas of the court.

"But Saurav can give too much respect (to opponents). Some, like Shabana, you have to respect, but you still have to give yourself a chance as well."

Ghosal's own interpretation has tended, perhaps without realising it, to support this view.

"I know there have been times when I could have done something like this before (reach the last eight of the World Championship), but I have to remember there are a lot of good players in squash," he says.

Another barrier involves developing the persistence needed to make the top 10. "Persistence is a big bit (of the game today)," Willstrop said. "It comes with experience. He has to home in on this.

"If he had a bit more persistence, he might have beaten Shabana," he reckoned, referring to Ghosal's high-quality 11-9, 11-6, 6-11, 11-7 loss to the four-time world champion at the Qatar Classic in November.

However, Ghosal must develop these qualities with less help than before. After eight years at Pontefract, he returned in July to Kolkata, where there is little competition and where he depends more on his own resources in training.

This move is even more surprising given that Ghosal's motives for going home have changed. These were not originally squash-related, but aimed at starting a business with his friend Siddharth Suchde, a former PSA Tour player.

When the plan faded, Ghosal refocused on squash, but remained in India anyway. Why?

"Because I am at home and quite happy," he answered. "And it shows in the way I am playing. I am really happy and I enjoy it a bit more."

Given that he says studying in Leeds was "amazing" and that he enjoyed being at Pontefract "unbelievably", it brought further queries about what he now enjoys more.

"I live with my grandparents. Everything is comfortable and everything is done for you," he replies. "You don't have to focus on anything except what you want to do. It's definitely nicer – you're not there on a survival basis."

However, because Ghosal now does not have players good enough to stretch him and only a few with whom to perform training routines, a lot of solo work is needed. This, he claims, has helped him, making him more confident in how he is hitting the ball.

"I don't have Malcolm saying 'that's right' and 'that's wrong', helping me improve, and I miss the pace when I play James (Willstrop)," he acknowledges.

"That's why it's still important to come to Pontefract sometimes. Otherwise, it's going to be hard. I don't want just to keep my level, I want to get better."

Meanwhile, Ghosal has been able to get a closer look at what needs to be done if India is to become a squash power.

The Sports Ministry needs to put more courts in schools "because there are a lot of rich schools around," he reckons. Playing squash at the moment requires being a member of a club which, he believes, prevents many people from playing.

So how was he able to succeed? "There have been good enough coaches to produce decent juniors and that's why we've been doing really well in the last 10 years," he replied.

"But we don't have enough know-how. We have no one who's been in the top five or 10 in the world, helping produce players who can be that good. I'm sure there are individuals who want to try but haven't been exposed to that sort of quality, so they don't know what needs to be done. That's a big, big problem and needs to be addressed."

Ghosal reveals too that finances are an issue. He says it is hard for most players to compete in top tournaments, as there is insufficient money for top-quality coaches, and he is also critical of the process by which funds are administered.

"You have to apply to the Government for money – because there is money available – but the whole process is cumbersome," he alleges.

"I have to apply two to two-and-a-half months in advance and approximate the cost of the flight tickets. I did that to play at Manchester (in the World Championship) and had to go back to get the money later on. To be drowned in paperwork is not what you want.

"In England you get a year's worth of money which is put in your account for you to do what you want with. Of course, some people might misuse the money. I say you might get one bad fish in the sea, but you help a lot more people.

"We should decide on four or five people we should give money to and then they can plan and decide what to do. Give them targets and evaluate whether they have met them."

These difficulties make it even more of a gamble in relinquishing the advantages of being based in Yorkshire. Having developed into a professional player is "entirely due" to Willstrop, he acknowledges.

Proximity to Willstrop's help was what sealed Ghosal's decision to study at Leeds University, where he was awarded a first in economics. Here he acquired a broader vision, an inkling that he would like to start a business after he has stopped competing and a greater articulacy. These days the words come cascading out in expression of a

generous, thoughtful personality.

He was also befriended by James Willstrop, the son of Malcolm and long-time top-10 player, and a regular sparring partner at Pontefract, along with a nucleus of other fine players.

He had the benefit too of high-standard league fixtures in which to develop match-winning instincts and he still comes back to play in some of those.

Whether that is sufficient to fuel the hoped-for improvement remains to be seen. At least Ghosal is clear about the reasons for his optimism.

"I understand myself better and my game better, what pace I want to play opponents at and what I am really good at," he said. "I am better at strategy and I am reading the game better. That has come from a lot of matches. I've played a lot of big tournaments in the last six years.

"There was the option to play in smaller tournaments, but I made a point of playing bigger tournaments and this experience has helped. I am tactically and mentally better.

"Physically, I have always been pretty good. I did a lot of work last summer and this is important against the top guys. Their pace is so high and if you can't keep up, you wither and then they pick you off. I have always been quick and I have worked on that, and this has helped."

Eventually Ghosal returned to an assessment of his future. "I hope I'm good enough to become a top-10 player, as Malcolm says, but I am not someone who is going to say I am good enough," he said, sounding rather like an echo of the psychology which Willstrop says restrains him.

"There are a lot of others players who are good enough as well. Hopefully I make it before I stop."



Coach Malcolm Willstrop makes a point to Saurav Ghosal