

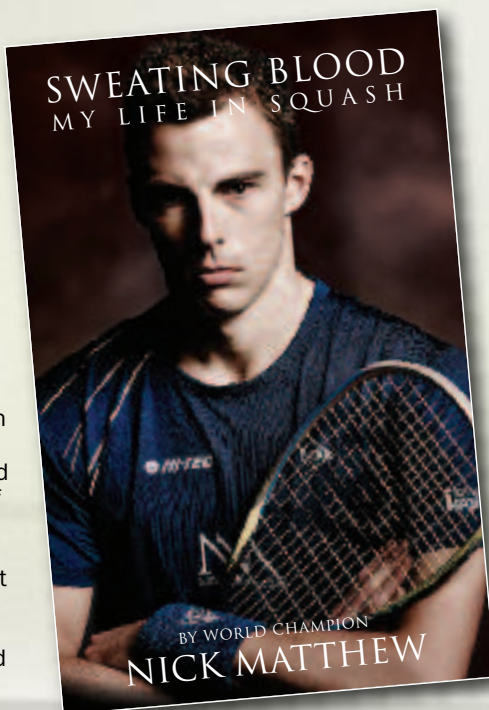
Let's rumble

In an extract from his popular book, 'Sweating Blood – My Life in Squash', Nick Matthew talks about his trainers and their regimes, including the infamous 'Rumble'

As I edged ever closer to the professional game, my dad realised I needed more specific and more expert training advice. He had recently read an article in the British Journal of Sports Medicine by an expert in the field called Edward Winter. Ed worked out of one of De Montfort University's campuses in Bedford, which is where he first subjected me to a fitness test. The test was overseen by the aforementioned Damon Leedale-Brown. It was my first experience of being wired up and poked and prodded like a guinea pig. My left index finger was sore the next day from the numerous blood samples they took. As well as being a fitness expert, Damon was also a strong squash player himself so his advice in strength, conditioning and nutrition was invaluable. For me, this was the most sophisticated physical training I'd ever witnessed.

Less than two years after that initial test, by an incredible stroke of luck, Ed and Damon relocated to Sheffield's Hallam University, just down the road from me. I had just turned professional so the timing couldn't have been better. It meant I could benefit from Damon's training sessions three or four times a week. We did weights in the university gym and on-court training at my club. I remember each time Damon turned up, the boot of his car looked like he'd just raided a circus props department: ladders, cones, Swiss balls, medicine balls, hula hoops, therabands. There was enough stuff in there for any number of clowns or trapeze acts. Much to his dismay, whenever he opened up the boot I'd say: "Looks like the circus is in town."

Anyone who's ever done serious fitness training will know about something called the bleep test. For those of you uninitiated, it basically involves running shuttle runs progressively faster between two cones, ensuring that you complete each shuttle before the next bleep sounds. Damon came up with this brilliant idea for a bleep test specific to squash.



Nick Matthew's book 'Sweating Blood - My Life in Squash' is available from www.isportstore.com/sweatingblood at a cost of £10

Instead of doing shuttle runs, I would do ghosting movements instead. But I still had to complete a set number of movements before each bleep sounded. Over the years, two bleep tests have developed. One is a total speed version in which you have to complete one lap of the test as fast as humanly possible. The other is a repeated speed version where you have to keep a consistent pace over a high number of reps. These are still the standard tests for squash players of all ages on the England national squad.

Damon used to set me killer bike sessions too. He would make me a MiniDisc (Yes, it was that long ago that we listened to music on the now obsolete MiniDisc) with music that would speed up and slow down depending on the difficulty of the training session. Whenever Sandstorm by Darude came on – a very fast, upbeat Finnish dance track – you knew you were in trouble.

In 2003 the English Institute of Sport opened in Sheffield and, thanks to my Lottery funding, I was given full use of it. On site were doctors, physios, psychologists, nutritionists, massage therapists and strength and

conditioning coaches. I was so lucky to have such an amazing facility right on my doorstep.

Around this time I switched to a trainer called Tommy Yule, a former Commonwealth Games medallist in weight-lifting. Tommy had no prior knowledge of squash but he knew exactly how to make a sportsman powerful. That guy was seriously strong. He was the first person to introduce me to dynamic exercises known as plyometrics. These involve using maximum force in minimum time – so lots of explosive jumping, leaping and bounding.

During my younger years I had developed a good physical engine (in part thanks to my cross-country running at school) and, through Damon, a good base of strength. But to compete at the top level I needed more speed and power. So under Tommy I started doing heavier squat exercises in the gym but with lower numbers of reps. Instead of resting in between sets of squats I would do a series of plyometric exercises. It was a great way to get my legs moving powerfully when they were already fatigued. To work on my agility Tommy then had me chasing a reaction ball (one of those rubber things with loads of knobs sticking out of it) around the gym like Rocky Balboa chasing the chicken. I'll never forget how he always had this massive bunch of keys jangling from his belt. In order to become more explosive off the mark – an essential skill in a sport like squash – Tommy used to get me doing short, 10-metre sprints. He was so fast he would beat me every time over this distance, even when I was warmed up in my running kit and he was still cold with all those keys jangling from his belt. Thanks to Tommy, my strength and power came on in leaps and bounds. I owe him an enormous debt.

In 2007 I met my third serious trainer, Mark Campbell. A cross between Damon and Tommy, he came from a rugby union background. But he had a deep knowledge of squash thanks to his years as a club-level player. If you need proof of his expertise in the physical side of the sport, just look at the roster of players he was training as I wrote this book: me, James Willstrop, Adrian Grant, Alister Walker and Madeline Perry.

It wasn't long before my shoulder operation that I first teamed up with Mark, so one of his early challenges was to keep me sane by devising an exercise regime during my long recuperation. That's when he invented the strength and conditioning circuits that have since become so infamous within the world of squash: we call them The Rumble.

The Rumble is absolute torture.

There's no other way of describing it. And it's my fault that Mark first devised it. We were enjoying a game of snooker one day and I happened to show him a copy of Men's Health magazine with a feature on my good self in it. There was another article in the magazine that caught Mark's eye all about a fitness sport called CrossFit. Practised at gyms all over the world, CrossFit is a combination of weight-lifting, gymnastics, aerobic exercises and exercises using just your own body weight. It's massive out in the States but it's getting very popular in Europe too.

Mark enjoys the pain of tough training and will regularly join in with the sessions he sets us. This new CrossFit thing was something he just couldn't resist. He had soon signed up for a CrossFit event, and he loved it, so he decided to use his experience to create a similar all-body workout which we eventually called The Rumble.

The problem with training for squash is that you need to be something of an all-rounder. You need both speed and stamina. You need flexibility but also strength. You need technical proficiency but also mental fortitude. The list goes on. It's impossible to train all of these aspects all of the time. Out of all the off-court sessions I've ever done, The Rumble is the one that ticks most of these boxes. And that's why, now, when I'm not at a tournament, I spend at least seven days a month doing repeated lunges, medicine ball throws, sprints, skipping, sled-dragging, step

exercises and dumbbell press-ups. Utter physical punishment.

It's vastly different from how squash training used to be. I used to hear stories about Jonah Barrington and Geoff Hunt's training regimes. Their off-court sessions involved brutal sets of 400-metre sprints which seemed to match the physical requirements of the sport at the time. The modern game has glass courts, a lower tin, technologically advanced rackets and a different scoring system, all of which can make for shorter and more explosive rallies. The Rumble prepares you much better for these types of rallies. It's a full body workout done at dynamic intervals with very little rest. Much like a game of squash. A typical Rumble session lasts non-stop for between 40 and 60 minutes with the only rest being the time it takes to walk from one exercise station to the next. Sometimes Mark will keep me on my toes by demanding a shorter Rumble at the end of an easier physical session. Those short Rumbles might last only three or four minutes but even that can make you feel like puking. Imagine how brutal the full-length ones are.

The Rumble has become legendary within squash circles. Whenever a player comes up to train with me for a few days we always challenge them to one. We crank up the music and get lots of banter going between the different players. There's often a T-shirt prize at stake. It all stems from Ian Pyper, Mark's assistant, who decided to join in one day. It was a particularly brutal Rumble on that occasion and he eventually came to a standstill during the sled-dragging sprints. After that he became famous as the man who got broken by The Rumble. The next time Ian turned up to the gym he brought with him a T-shirt he'd found at home with the word 'Unbreakable' on the front of it. Now, whoever performs best during The Rumble gets to keep the T-shirt and wear it during the next session when everyone else tries to win it back – a bit like a tournament trophy but a lot, lot sweatier.

Men's Health magazine even got to hear about The Rumble and ran a feature on it a couple of years ago.

