

Winning not everything for Matthew

Richard Eaton finds out from Nick Matthew what his remaining targets are in squash after winning a third world title and regaining the world no.1 ranking

World champion a third time and world no.1 again after nearly two years – all when well into his 34th year. Can Nick Matthew possibly do more? He thinks he can.

What has made this unwisely underestimated player so great? The fact that, most of the time, he thinks he can be.

This stubbornly assertive quality has characterised much of Matthew's surprising career. It helped him remodel his game, achieve unique successes for an English player and confound many opinions.

Few would have predicted such achievements, so perhaps few should predict he cannot do more now.

However, there are caveats. No man has won a world title at his age. He never

sought to regain the top spot and a younger man's schedule may be required to maintain it. And he may only have a couple of years left.

So what does he think he can still do?

The dream goal, becoming the oldest male world champion ever, is somewhere in his mind, but another kind of motivation is more prominent during his career's last lap.

Matthew identified it most clearly on the flight home from Hong Kong, where he capped an astonishing 2013 by winning his first HK Open and ensured against longish odds that he would top the rankings again. There was a sense that nothing might ever be so good again.

His solution is to be "enjoying squash

again and feeling a passion to get better every day when I wake up. When you have this, winning is not everything - it is a bonus."

He had embraced this wisdom before, but lost sight of it a little. "I set fewer performance goals," he says. "It's more about improving, enjoying it and trying to evolve as a player.

"You need performance goals to keep motivated, but now it's more about a new mentality – and just one or two big tournaments."

Had he been tempted to stop? "I thought about it quickly. I thought about cricket when I was a teenager and that never happened either," was his quirky but telling reply.

Matthew did not need to stop but to adapt. This is easier when you are fresher, so he took a break, even though it meant going to the U.S. Open not having competed for many weeks. He even risked coming to the World Championship in Manchester a bit under-prepared.

"I am willing to do that in 2014 too," he said. "I've proved it works. It may not work all the time, but I play my best squash when I am fresh.

"I am a long time retired, as everyone is. My ambition is to stay healthy and at the top, and to have no regrets – that remains the same. I am fortunate that if none of my future goals happen, I can still retire knowing that this will be so."

Now he wants to avoid any sense of failure if he doesn't win a tournament. He wants a mentality which takes pressure off rather than puts it on. It may not always come naturally to him, though.

If this sounds like a gentler version of a life he already has, nothing is further from the truth. Winning a third world title changed several things.

It has brought more attention, more interviews, a Sports Journalists' Association award and a campaign with Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, to develop squash. He has a larger team around him, some of them helping to shield him from demands upon his time.

Even before that there was a book to write, an academy to plan and a wedding to experience. Did marriage alter his mentality?

"Not directly," he reckons. "But I think indirectly. It gives you a bit more perspective. It was nothing I was conscious of, but a lot of people have said I am a bit more relaxed and mature."

This may have aided his calm recovery from his beating by Gregory Gaultier in the U.S. Open final.

He responded by overcoming the



Nick Matthew lunges for a backhand in his memorable 2013 World Championship final win against Greg Gaultier

Matthew receives a kiss from wife Esme after being presented with the World Championship trophy

Frenchman in a World Championship final in Manchester which was a severe test of body and emotions, then by beating him again in a semi-final on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront in Hong Kong.

Why did people take so long to realise how good Matthew is? Partly perhaps because his workmanlike style in earlier years possessed more evident technical faults and partly because his best successes arrived after the age of 30.

Talk to fitness trainer Mark Campbell and long-time coach David Pearson and it becomes clear that there were many qualities which people could have missed.

"He is probably as good an athlete as I have worked with, and I have worked in many sports, including with the All Blacks rugby team," says Campbell, senior strength and conditioning coach at the English Institute of Sport (EIS).

"Nick leaves no stone unturned. He's prepared to make sacrifices. He is very professional. He's very quick. He has great speed.

"He's also mentally one of the toughest guys I have ever met. It shows in his training. He goes to lengths most athletes don't. He's willing to push himself to do extra."

Campbell's role has been important. He created a regime which helped Matthew recover from a shoulder injury that kept him out for eight months in 2008 and threatened his career.

"I have seen that sort of shoulder injury with rugby players and it can be

horrific," Campbell emphasised. "I have seen them retire.

"We helped get him through that. Now he works on the upper body and shoulders. Squash players don't usually have strong upper bodies. It's more strength in the legs. But Nick works to ensure his shoulders are strong enough to last for the rest of his career."

Pearson recalls a story about meal-time jibes made by other players about the younger Matthew. "They were saying he hasn't got this, he hasn't got that and they totally underestimated him," said Pearson.

"What Nick has done in changing his technique over several years has enabled him to show what he can do. He surprised everyone.

"He is unique in having remodelled his game at such a [late] stage. He now has a wide wingspan which he never had before, because he changed his swing."

Matthew also learned to play very straight on the volley and the volley drop. His forehand volley drop is one of the best around.

He developed a capacity to take the ball very early and to move quickly. His lateral movement became superb.

When returning from a back corner became an issue, he worked on changing the angle of his racket face. "He is always working on his technique, bit by bit, just slightly, even now," says Pearson.

"He is a joy to work with. I would say: 'What do you think, Nick?' He would say: 'David Pearson, I do what you ask me

because you are not going to listen to me! You are going to do what you want to do anyway!'

"He has never challenged me, in terms of arguing. On court he has never even questioned anything I have suggested, which is rare. Not anything, ever."

Pearson also highlights Matthew's emotional strength. "He almost never gets down," he claims. "At the U.S. Open, Greg gave him an absolute tonking and Nick said: 'I'm glad he did that to me'. I said: 'Okay, right!'

"He has peaked early', Nick said. 'This is my first tournament after the summer and I know I'm playing well'. And he said: 'I'm going to win the World Championship'.

"I remember thinking: 'You are on a different planet!' Then I thought: 'You know what, maybe the little bugger does have a chance.' Now I think for Nick to have won the world title three times is amazing."

Given the strength of their association, it is perhaps not surprising that Pearson believes Matthew can supersede the great Geoff Hunt as the oldest male world champion. But it is still intriguing to hear him say so.

"I definitely do," he said. "Nick has not lost enthusiasm. When he is with me, it is like he is still 21. His body is in such good shape.

"He has always been young in body and he has the mentality to go with it. I can see him pushing on for a year or 18 months. He's quite inspiring."

Pearson warning on coaches

David Pearson gratefully accepted the 'coach of the decade' accolade given to him by Nick Matthew after his third world title and then warned that the UK is losing most of its best coaches.

"Coaches are marginalised," he said. "With the advent of the English Institute of Sport and all the sports science staff, there are not many coaches left. It's sad and it's worrying," he said.

"Athletes have become obsessed with sports science and have forgotten what the core of the sport is – playing squash," he claimed. "It is an art. Technique is important.

"Strength and conditioning are valuable too, but athletes forget that the coach should have a lead role in terms of education. Instead, they go off by themselves thinking they know better and get it wrong.

"Sports scientists are very important, but only up to a point. Coaches should be leading the sport and not placed in a secondary role. They are not getting the credit they deserve and we have lost most

of them. About 90 per cent have gone to America.

"You need all the ingredients: physical, mental, tactical – and technical as well. If you want to be world no.1 and you don't have technical qualities, forget it."

Matthew agreed: "The technical side is neglected. If you're not careful, it

becomes more about getting fit and strong. But if you're not technically good, you're not going to be able to do it.

"There are four areas – mental, physical, tactical and technical – and you need people who are strong in each area. If you are not technically proficient, you won't be able to execute."



Nick Matthew listens to advice from coach David Pearson during the World Championship final