

Head to Head



James Willstrop, the world no.1, and Nick Matthew, the reigning world champion, face off in the build-up to the Men's World Championship, with Rod Gilmour posing the questions

In the space of two years Britain has produced two world no.1s who both hail from Yorkshire, Nick Matthew and James Willstrop. In that time the pair have been a revelation on the PSA World Tour. Up until the U.S. Open – when neither reached the final – the last time either Willstrop or Matthew failed to make the last stage of a tour ranking event was in November 2010, a sensational run of 19 tournaments.

That telling statistic shows their current stranglehold on the men's game, at a time when Egypt boasts five players in the world's top 10. With the Yorkshiremen heading into the World Championship in Doha, Qatar, as the top two seeds – Matthew is bidding for a hat-trick of world titles, while Willstrop is aiming for his first as no.1 seed – Squash Player brought the duo together to talk about their career-long rivalry.

Willstrop's favourite five:

- Book:** 'High Windows' by Philip Larkin
- Album:** 'Vauxhall and I' by Morrissey
- Travel destination:** London
- Film:** 'Control'
- Coffee or tea:** Coffee

Matthew's favourite five:

- Book:** 'Open' by Andre Agassi
- Album:** Kings of Leon's 'Come Around Sundown'
- Travel destination:** St Lucia
- Film:** 'Any Given Sunday'
- Coffee or tea:** Yorkshire Tea by default

Squash Player: We must first start with that semi-final at the Canary Wharf Classic in 2010. Was it the best match you've both been involved in so far?

Nick Matthew: It had everything. There were times when he was on top and vice versa, a huge tiebreak which had drama, games where I was down and out, full-court squash and the drama with James' cramp [when Willstrop was forced to concede the match in the fifth after 127 minutes]. It was very unusual that two players play as well as that on the same day in an environment like that too. But it came together on that day.

James Willstrop: I think the British Open in 2009 was quality, but Canary Wharf had everything: the rallies and pushing each other to the limits. It was one of those matches. I remember coming off and the cramp was horrible. But, warming down, I was very relaxed about it. There was no point feeling down, as I felt so good. I wanted to be around people. We had given everything and it was one of those matches where you feel so content with what you've achieved. We train to beat the likes of Ramy Ashour and Gregory Gaultier, but that night the winning became a separate issue.

NM: Halfway through the match James had won the third game and I came to my corner and felt like a boxer trying to throw in the towel. I certainly took on multiple personalities during the break. My coach, Neil Guirey, was talking to me, but I don't think anything got through. One minute I was saying to myself, "Oh well, he's got to beat me one day" and the next, "Well, it won't be today". Those emotions will stick with me. I think he cramped about a second before me, with all those long backhand drop-shots he was producing going just above the tin.

SP: If Canary Wharf had everything, what went wrong at the 2009 British Open final in Manchester to make it so fraught?

NM: It was a rollercoaster in a different way. Whereas Canary Wharf was a classic virtually every point, this was more of a scrappy affair. It was a dig-in, gritty type of match, where we saw the small confines and gladiatorial nature of the sport. Neither player ever goes out to be confrontational or have needle in any way. I was getting beaten comfortably. I almost had to gee myself up, perhaps in the wrong way looking back on it. But I just needed something to see me through. We were playing the final at 7pm and an hour earlier we were doing a live chat with Chris Evans on BBC Radio 2. It was an interesting build-up, that's for sure. I remember Chris asking James about banter on court and James said that Nick liked to do this or that. I used to be taught by James' dad, Malcolm, as a Yorkshire junior and his philosophy has always been to play the ball, move out of

the way of the opponent and don't fish for strokes. Perhaps the interview was still fresh in my mind, because during the final I remember James not getting out of the way of one shot and I said "Did your Dad teach you to do that?" There were fumes and the rest is history. Perhaps I have Chris Evans to thank for the win.

JW: I don't really remember the interview or what was said, with it being so close to the final. But when I think of Canary Wharf I feel good about it, less so than the Manchester final. It is always a great achievement to reach the British final. We know it was contentious under the most intense pressure, but I don't look back on it with fond memories. There was a bit more room for niggles perhaps, as it was the bigger tournament, no disrespect to Canary.

SP: The great thing is that this rivalry is not recent. What is your first memory of each other?

JW: I think I was six or seven at the British juniors. I think Nick was there and we might even have played. The rivalry thing, the fact we have gone right back to the beginning and now we have got to number one and two in the world, is a pretty fantastic story, isn't it? As an innocent kid playing Nick, week in, week out, those early Yorkshire teams were also great early memories, with the parents mucking in at weekends.

NM: All I remember was that he was taller than me, even though I was 12 and he was three years younger than me.

SP: Over 20 years on, here we are talking about the best two players in the world.

NM: The second most-asked question I get asked after why squash isn't in the Olympics is my rivalry with James. However, it is not just about us, as that would be disrespectful to our peers. But the close proximity to where we live, the difference in characters and the matches we've had are certainly what makes it. It's important to maximise it, I think, but it's not about being ranked above James. I don't think we would be talking about it if we were world no.14 and 15, would we?

JW: Nick pointed it out in a recent interview, where we were seeded one and two, and it was another anticipated final between us. But people don't realise how hard the first rounds are. I wouldn't even consider playing Nick until I am there. Yes, we are both at the top, but the depth is getting stronger and we can't take anyone for granted. For us, it's the last thing we think about.

SP: You have both felt the emotion of world no.1. Is the memory still with you and what did it feel like?

NM: It was unexpected. I thought I had to beat Ramy in the final in Cairo, but he lost. It was a bit tough to take in. There was a lot of emotion and I will always

remember that day.

JW: I felt the same and it was incredible. For a week I was trying not to think about it, but knowing damn well it was there. I had won two events on the trot and all I had to do was win the final against Greg. No one had won three in a row! I had such a big chance, but it wasn't going to be the end of the world. There are people far worse off. But these things don't come along every day and when it happened, there was immense relief and exuberance. There were a lot of laughs along the way that week, making sure I stayed healthy and was eating the right things. If I had stopped too long to think about it, it could have become quite stressful.

NM: And then all the work flashes in front of you: how hard you train and work to get to that position. A lot of reminiscing went on, which was an amazing feeling.

SP: Looking to the future now, what changes would you make to improve the PSA Tour?

JW: I personally think it is a collection of little things we need to chip away at. Nobody in squash is marketing and promoting the game to its full potential. As associations, we are not working as efficiently as possible. We need to get the players out into the public and promote the sport through them. People need to know the characters and then they are far more likely to come and watch them play.

NM: America seems to be a key battleground with the emergence of the Pro Squash Tour (PST). On the World Tour we have seen events like the NetSuite Open in San Francisco, which started life as a \$10k event and is now a \$70k tournament. The next logical step is for it to become a World Series event. That's the model you are looking at in the States and lots of clubs are beginning to grow interest in the game. Any tournaments are good for squash, so I don't have a problem with the PST, but the PSA should batten down the hatches, as North America is a massive area for the game.

SP: The world's top 10 are not getting any younger, but will Ramy Ashour still be near the top of the game in 2020 if squash gets into the Olympics?

NM: If his body holds up and his mind wants it. It's a long way off, so only Ramy can answer that.

JW: He's lost weight and knows his body after recent injuries. He seems to be working that out, but that will obviously be a factor. If he pays attention to that, then he may have some longevity. I hope he is still there and we should give him every chance.

SP: Finally, can you sum each other up in six words?

NM: Great racket skills, a stubborn Yorkshireman.

JW: A mentally strong, dogged, ruthless athlete.