

MOHAMED MAKES CRISIS CALL

Mohamed ElShorbagy tells Rod Gilmour how a phone call to Australian great David Palmer has reignited his career

Imagine coming off court after a 24-minute thrashing and not knowing where your game is heading. That was the potential conundrum facing Mohamed ElShorbagy at the El Gouna International in April.

With his game heading into freefall and without a final appearance for five months, this dispiriting, one-sided quarter-final defeat came against – ironically – his brother, Marwan, in front of his home fans.

Except Mohamed knew exactly what to do. Still in his match kit, he tapped in David Palmer's number and called the great Australian barely five minutes later.

"I was literally still in my sweaty clothes," ElShorbagy reveals to *Squash Player*. "We'd only spoken twice before in my life and I told him that I was having a bit of a tough time in my career and needed a change.

"There is always a difference with a player who has actually lived something like that. He lived at the top of the rankings, lost motivation and dealt with things off court.

"He was very welcoming, knew exactly how I felt and sometimes you need that excitement to get you refreshed."

For a player who came to the UK aged 15 and has been working with the same stable for 11 years – namely mentor Jonah Barrington, mother Basma and coach Hadrian Stiff – it is an eye-opening changing of the guard as he attempts to land a first world title in Manchester.

Yet ElShorbagy had been mooting this change for some time last season. "The guys who have trained me will always be there," he says. "I never call Jonah my squash coach – he is like my squash godfather – and every athlete goes through change in their career."

Some 6,000 miles away at Cornell University, near New York, Palmer still

keeps in touch with the world game on television in his office, in between coaching students in the head coach role he has been in since last October.

Palmer just happened to be watching ElShorbagy's defeat too. "The next thing it is Mohamed on the phone. I was thinking 'oh, that's strange'," explains the 41-year-old.

"It was a bit of shock, but I was never going to turn it down and it is a great, exciting opportunity."

The pair then thrashed out a schedule, which would see ElShorbagy train with Palmer for a month leading up to the NetSuite Open in San Francisco, his first event of the season.

But before ElShorbagy hung up, he said: "You know, David, I don't accept being no.3; I only accept being no.1. When I told him this, he understood my mentality and

the kind of challenge he would have to work with me."

What ElShorbagy meant by "no.1" was to challenge himself to win. "Last season I didn't play like a winner," he adds. "I don't mind losing if I give my best on court. But I was mentally not there."

By the time ElShorbagy had ended the call, he already felt motivated. It had come after a trying period in the 26-year-old's life. "We are all human beings and I had a few things to deal with last season," he says.

ElShorbagy won't divulge those personal issues, but admits that the off-court problems were new to him, at a time when his on-court form was in decline.

"It felt like life was going against me," he reflects from his home in Bristol, although it matured him no bounds. "It made me realise how to separate life from my work. It was part of maturity and growing up."

His training with Palmer firmed up in the diary, he won June's World Series Finals in Dubai. He wasn't physically at his best there, but he certainly looked hungry for the title.

Two months later, ElShorbagy was on a plane to the US. Palmer reveals: "I wasn't quite sure how his day-to-day outlook was, having not worked with top Egyptians. But he was very organised, did his own thing and was content with himself."

The Australian also knew what ElShorbagy was going through. "For so long Jonah and Hadrian have done a fantastic job, where he was clearly the best and unbeatable for nearly two years. But it's almost impossible to hold it nowadays and you naturally come off the boil."

"It's one thing to get to no.1, it's how long you can stay there for is the challenge, with everyone trying to beat you."

"I went off track, as I worried too much, calculating the points and the matches. It affected me and I went away and returned to focus on one match at a time."

History has clearly played a part in the pair's bonding. Growing up, ElShorbagy knew that the squash rivalry then was all about Jonathon Power and Peter Nicol. In ElShorbagy's eyes, Palmer was attracting less recognition.

"The older I got, the more I looked at how much more he achieved than them," said

the Egyptian. "It's unbelievable how he got four British and two world titles. He was so tough to play and was a step ahead of both of them in the big matches. It takes so much character to deal with these things, ignore them and still be a winner."

Perhaps this connection is why Palmer hasn't missed one game of ElShorbagy's this season since they joined forces. With tournaments in Hong Kong and Qatar, Palmer has risen at 3am for ElShorbagy's matches.

His resurgent form this season has seen him lose just one match and secure four titles ahead of the World Championship. A return to world no.1 after losing top spot in April could also be imminent.

"There is no better feeling than winning a tournament with a tough draw," says ElShorbagy. "All the players are unbeatable on their day. It won't be easy, but I'm going to give it my best."

Meanwhile, Palmer, who may be in Manchester from the quarter-finals onwards, adds: "He is desperate to get that world no.1 back, but it's about not getting too fixated on it and going one match at a time. If he keeps the pattern he has, he will get there again."

PALMER - HOW I HELPED ELSHORBAGY

"I've been watching him over the years and he was hitting too many crosscourt shots and becoming predictable. So, from day one, I was trying to get him to mix it up and hit the ball straighter from the front of the court.

"It's important in the next few years for him to be smarter and more efficient in winning matches. He has to look after his body and it is key not to get into too many long matches early on in tournaments."

"He is physically fit and his mental approach and focus are very astute, so it was more the tactical game that we focused on. He is a great volleyer, but perhaps he wasn't utilising it enough.

"I was trying to get him further up the T and encourage him not to hit the ball hard at 100mph, but to place it with more touch at the front and pick his moments.

"He is lobbing more and is realising that he doesn't have to hit the ball into the nick with every shot, but to win points with good tight length. It's all about trying to make his game that much simpler."



Mohamed ElShorbagy receives some tips from his Australian coach, David Palmer, at the recent U.S. Open