

Raneem El Welily kisses the PSA World Championship trophy after winning it for the first time in Manchester last year

RELAXATION IS KEY TO WORLD TITLE

Raneem El Welily tells Richard Eaton why she has had to wait until the comparatively late age of 28 to become world champion

Raneem El Welily seemed different. Sometimes indiscreet with shot selection, she had picked her most ambitious moments well. Inclined to be tense, she had been more relaxed. And when the showdown moments arrived, she handled them well.

So, does it feel different to be world champion? "Not at all," El Welily replied, so swiftly it was almost a retort. "You don't change the world by becoming world champion."

That is El Welily. A person of fine sensibilities, a player of delightful but occasionally variable talents, a bit of an enigma and a paradox. So often a paradox.

Although only 10 years old when she first represented Egypt, not until she was within a few days of her 29th birthday did she become world champion.

She has entranced spectators with her wrong-footing creativity, yet consistency can be elusive. The first Egyptian woman in any sport to become the world no.1, not until now has she won squash's ultimate title.

One of the reasons for this, according to El Welily, is that the considerable talent she inherited from her parents has been "a blessing and a curse".

It has been a hidden influence on the ups and downs of her career.

"I have the ability to hit shots in 10 different ways," she explains. That is the blessing. "But 10 different ways is not best for me because I am not very good when it comes to choice. One or two would be better. So I have to be careful with my stroke technique. I have to find another way to do it." That is the curse.

Decision-making can be even more

complex in an era which has tended to generate more adventurous styles, because it can confront El Welily with still more choices. Reading a match's patterns whilst judging the climate of her mood causes complications. In Manchester she achieved both. However, sometimes she doesn't.

"I have always been tense," she admits. "The pressure has got to me more than once, so I try to enjoy my moments on court more."

This is what happened during the World Championship triumph, she suggests.

When El Welily seems unable to relax, her coaches encourage her to enjoy what she is doing. "I'm hoping that's going to happen more now," she said, adding with a half laugh. "But I can't see it yet."

The pressure she felt in her two previous world finals was understandable, for each were played before expectant Egyptian home crowds. But why so much improvement in Manchester? Why not in Cayman or Penang or Kuala Lumpur?

If all that sounds like abandonment to the arbitrary tides of the unconscious, don't imagine El Welily isn't a rational thinker. For nine years she was educated at a German school in Alexandria. This, she claims, caused "the girls around me to think I am too organised and strict, but I think I'm normal!"

She is unafraid to be herself. El Welily proved that again by moving on to the Arab Academy for Science and Technology, where she became a Bachelor of Trade Logistics and International Trade Manage-



ment. Squash isn't the only important thing in life.

At the same time, she comprehends squash's complexities. "So many details make the difference. Talent is never enough," she says. "It's about focusing on three aspects – techniques and tactics, physical fitness and mental strength. Master all three and you have the ideal combination." She has achieved these things best since joining the Wadi Degla club in Cairo, which she describes as "by far the most professional and supportive club in my career". Whilst her birthplace and formative years were in Alexandria, she has developed into a great player during the last few years in the Egyptian capital.

It means she only sees her mother, Reeme – to whom she owes everything, she has claimed – about three times a week, when she comes to Cairo. Sometimes El Welily makes the 140-mile journey to Alexandria instead.

"I prefer living in Alexandria because it's cooler," she says. "The air is cleaner, there's access to a beach and it's more relaxing. People are more laid-back. Everything's hot in Cairo and the pace is really quick."

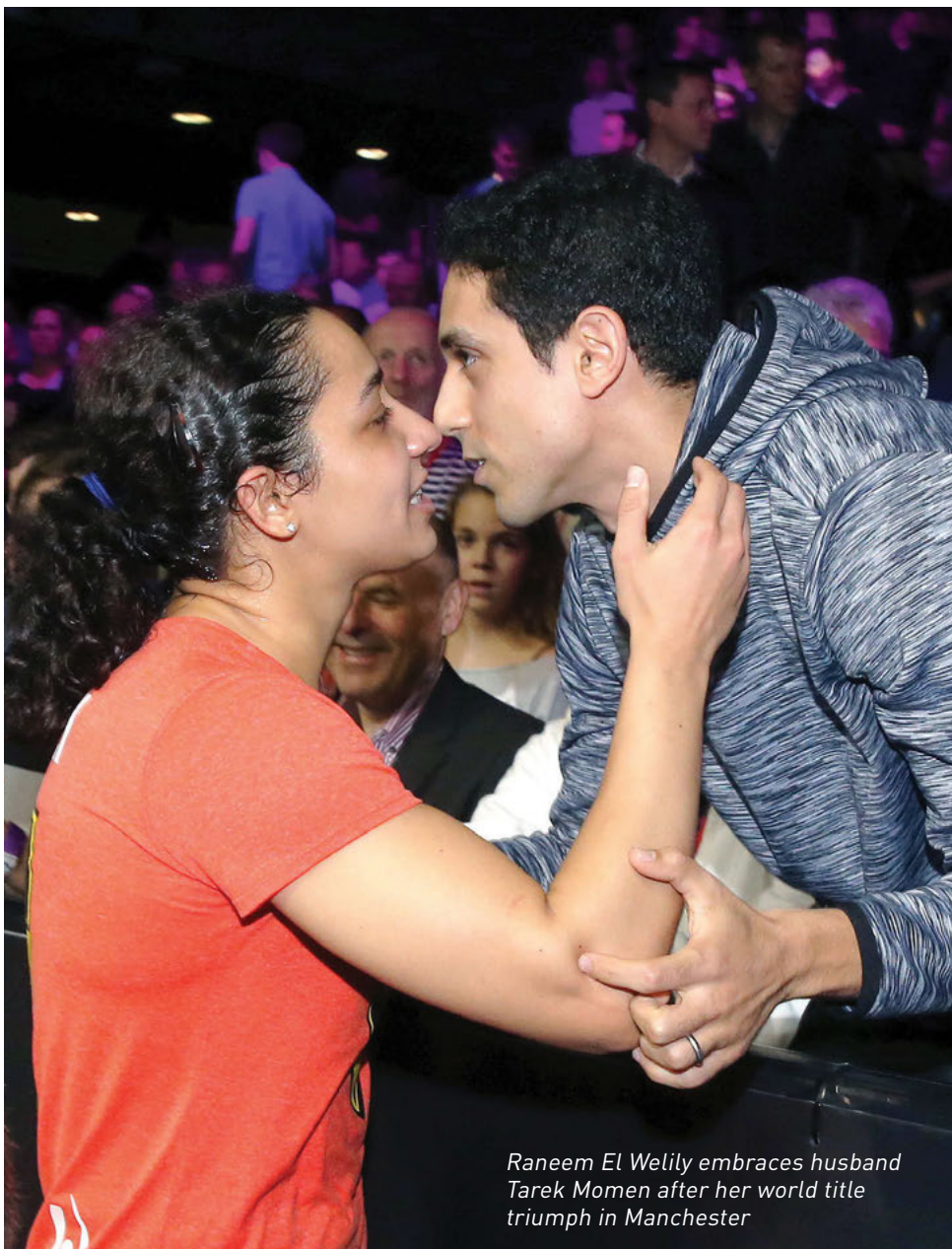
Despite that, she trains six days a week, with Friday her day off. "Men have to go and pray in the mosque, but for me it is a day where I sleep in, more of a family day, not necessarily religious," she says. "But we do pray every day." Does she pray by herself? "I try to," she replies.

Thus many perspectives have influenced her life. These have increased her maturity – something contributing to the mental improvements which helped make her world champion.

"I hope that is the reason, but you look at the others," she added, referring to Nour El Sherbini, Nouran Gohar and Nour El Tayeb. "They achieved mental stability quite early."

The development of those younger players may have been influenced by a transformation in the women's game. This process accelerated not long after a dramatic December night in Cairo in 2014, when El Welily's four match-points in the world final slipped agonisingly away against a resourceful Nicol David.

"Now, we play alongside the men," El Welily pointed out. "And the tin is lower." One couldn't help wondering if one of those match-points lost, with a volleyed backhand service return which just touched the tin, would have produced a winner with today's 17-inch version.



Raneem El Welily embraces husband Tarek Momen after her world title triumph in Manchester

El Welily is more interested in the future, though. "Everything is moving faster and change is faster," she said. "Everyone is physically stronger. Our matches are visible on SQUASHTV. Everyone is keen.

"There is also more prize money and equal prize money. The women are more passionate about it. The difference (in standard) between many women is very small now. But there can be so much more money in the sport. It's just a matter of time."

Would that encourage her to compete for longer? "It's never been about money for me," she responded at once. "I'm not materialistic. It's been about the journey I've enjoyed, about setting goals and going after them, about growing, about people, and making others happy."

Maturity poured through this revelation. El Welily is now the senior player among her touring compatriots, though that makes her uneasy. "I'm not happy I'm the oldest Egyptian," she revealed.

Reminded that players are often at their best between the ages of 30 and 35 these days, she avoided saying whether she would like to become one of them or what she might do in retirement. It was evident, though, that she had thought of it.

"I think Egypt now is unfortunate. People are confused with regard to values and ethics, and I hope that will change," she commented. "I've always wished to do something which will help others and make others happy."

Although she didn't say so, that hope and that wish seemed connected.