

David's daunting burden

Richard Eaton looks ahead to the women's showpiece in Malaysia, when home favourite Nicol David will be under more pressure than ever to retain her world title

Nicol David will bear her biggest ever burden before an audience of many millions, few of them aware of how large it will be. Indeed, no squash player will ever have borne more than the Malaysian when she defends her world title later this month.

Despite all this, when her home state of Penang filled the vacuum belatedly created by an absence of takers for the 2013 World Championship, she was the one who signed the agreement on behalf of the WSA.

In doing so, she knew that she would need not only to perform the roles of chief promoter, principal actor and tournament favourite, but that of a national icon too,

albeit a rather vulnerable one.

The seven-times world champion will be the intense focus of a demanding nation, but with little of the protection and none of the distance afforded her by previous World Championships.

She will be expected to win and will be placed under constant pressure by people not realising they are doing this.

Even Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng commented that "the Penang government feels it will be a shame if Nicol is unable to add to her already impressive record of seven world titles."

Of course he was just explaining why they had taken the World Championship on, but the comment could suggest that everything has been set up solely for her to deliver - which will make it all the harder for her to do so.

No squash player, not even Jahangir Khan, knows quite what the pressure will be like for David, because by the time the legendary Pakistani competed in a World Open in Karachi, in 1993, he was no longer the favourite.

Perhaps Amr Shabana has a fair idea. The World Open was set up at Giza in 2006 principally for Shabana to make a title defence before

an Egyptian audience, but squash legend though he already was, he didn't succeed.

Halfway through the tournament

Shabana admitted, rather wisely, that carrying the hopes of the nation was nerve-wracking when under constant inspection.

The response was not so wise. "Why would you be nervous?" a TV presenter asked him. "You are among your own people. Everyone is on your side."

That, of course, was the problem. It will be David's too. Her best assets may be the mental blocking mechanisms she has previously used (not completely successfully), her greater experience and her fitness, which perhaps is now better than ever.

When the World Championship was agreed, David withdrew from the Windy City Open in Chicago and returned to Amsterdam, her adopted home, to train. "The important thing is for my body to be ready," she said.

She believes she can remain at the

top provided she maintains her intensity - and she admits that depends on how her body holds up.

David is well into her 31st year. Age could become a factor, but it ought not to yet, especially if she gets her preparation right. Many players are at their best after this age and David may be one of them, for she has remained in good condition.

Against that, her game still relies a lot on its physicality, despite improvements to her volleying and tactical options.

"Every small detail can make a huge difference," David said. "It's always work in progress because of the complexity of the game."

Much may depend on her adaptability and calmness if a tussle develops with a younger, pressure-free rival. Hence the ability to relax may be vital.

"I'm enjoying squash more than I ever have," she claims, something which may prove very important amidst the nationalistic fervour she will be surrounded by.

Recent results have mostly been encouraging. David has won all seven of her tournaments since losing the British Open final to Laura Massaro last May.

However, in the U.S. Open final she trailed 2/1 to Massaro before rallying to win and in the China Open final she lost the first two games before beating Raneem El Welily. The Englishwoman and the Egyptian remain her closest rivals.

Massaro, who should be seeded to meet David in the final, is also 30, so this could be one of her last chances to become world champion. She has, though, been a notable late developer and is coached by David Pearson, who helped Nick Matthew to three world titles after his 30th birthday.

Meanwhile, El Welily, the third seed, is five years younger and has a capacity to generate phases where she is a level above everyone else. If she increases the frequency of those phases, she will be dangerous.

Another contender might be Alison Waters, the British national champion, who volleys well and who beat David in New York 18 months ago.

"The players step their game up with me every time," David said. "Those who beat me became better players on the day by reinforcing their game."

Nevertheless, David has, amazingly, remained number one ever since August 2006 and she still seems to be better than them all. She has also retained a capacity to be wary of them all. She may need that.



Nicol David en route to her 2011 world title in Rotterdam