

Mum's the word for Shorbagys!

Basma El Shorbagy, mother and manager of talented Egyptian squash brothers Mohamed and Marwan, outlines to Rod Gilmour how she is plotting their route to the top

Are we on the verge of seeing the male equivalent of tennis' Grand Slam-winning Williams sisters emerge in the squash world? Basma El Shorbagy, mother to burgeoning Egyptian brothers Mohamed and Marwan, certainly thinks so.

"My dream is to see my sons at no.1 and no.2 all over the world, like Venus and Serena," she says in a manner which suggests the scenario has been on her mind for a decade or so.

There's more from Egypt's no.1 squash mother: "I am also trying to help them towards making the final of the World Championship together. I think we can achieve this."

Meet Mrs Shorbagy – travel agent, manager, sports agent and loving, but clearly determined, mother to her two now-professional sons.

We can only wonder how many times the washing machine at their home in Alexandria has rotated with squash kit, ever since oldest son Mohamed took up the game aged nine, with Marwan

following 18 months later.

To understand how much she has absorbed all facets of the game, you only have to watch her in the spectator seats during a crunch match. Here she feels every shot, moving her body with every swing of her sons' rackets. This was evident in Doha during Mohamed's World Championship final against Ramy Ashour.

"I sometimes watch with a feeling that they should be doing more cross-court or be standing straighter. It is normal to feel the game like that," she says.

But here's the thing – she was also the first person in the auditorium that December night to leap to her feet and applaud vivaciously when Ashour beat Mohamed. I know this because I happened to be watching her at the time. It was a serene moment.

"I was with my children all the time and on the court as well when they were having lessons," she said of her introduction to squash. "I heard every word from all the coaches. I have learnt

from Gamal Awad (Mohamed's first coach) and many other Egyptian coaches over the years."

Mrs Shorbagy has never played the game, but she has a deep love of the sport. "It is not hard to understand, so it is experience from hearing lots of stories from Gamal and Jonah Barrington and watching the videos," she explains.

She says that having two "champions" (both brothers are, after all, multiple world junior winners) is important, in that "every step is an experience".

"From the top 20 to the top 10 and beyond, I have learnt a lot alongside Mohamed now he is top five. And then there is the psychological side with Marwan's growth also," she adds.

With both now on the professional circuit, this is almost the second chapter of the Shorbagy story. The first came aged 15, when mother took Mohamed to Somerset, where he started his Millfield School scholarship. Mrs Shorbagy stayed for two weeks before returning to Egypt to look after Marwan.

"It was our first time away from home," she recalls. "I couldn't imagine how I would feel and it was a very hard decision for us. I feel I was very committed to Mohamed at this age. It wasn't an easy decision, as family is so important in Egypt. I was very worried and always crying, but I felt it was the right step for my son and couldn't be selfish."

There really was no need to worry after the welcome the pair received from Barrington at the train station. "It made it easier for me that I had made the right decision and that he would be in safe hands," she says.

"He is one of the greatest and we should learn off him all the time. I am very happy that they are both still near Jonah."

Mohamed, the current world no.5, revealed in our exclusive interview in the last issue of *Squash Player* that he has happily morphed Egyptian flair with the methodical, classic English style into his game.

"To add another tactic to his game is fantastic," is Mrs Shorbagy's view. "He (Jonah) understands and likes his game. Mohamed's game is unique, but he wants him to keep his game and to have two or three other plans in a match."

Moving away from the security of home, the Shorbagys – mother and Marwan returned to Somerset the following year – have eschewed the life that befalls most Egyptian kids, who have to deal with the madness of an upbringing on local courts and the fight to reach the



Basma El Shorbagy talking tactics with her oldest son, Mohamed

top in their age group.

Moving to the UK at that age was clearly character-building stuff and after a decade watching squash “from morning until night”, Mrs Shorbagy clearly knows each son’s way of thinking. “Maybe Mohamed is straighter than Marwan in his life,” she admits. “When you speak to him, he tells you directly his point of view and his way of thinking. Marwan’s character isn’t as easy to understand.”

Their daily upbringing was one built around school, gym, athletics track and squash court. Mrs Shorbagy ferried them there and put food on the table. When Mohamed was starting out, Awad would arrange his fitness, which Mrs Shorbagy oversaw. Holidays were refused and the blame would lie with mother if Mohamed took any breaks.

As such, the Shorbagys have never had a conventional holiday. Both parents have worked as civil engineers, while their father’s job has taken him all over the Middle East.

Life, though, is slowly changing. Mohamed will usually have one day off a week from squash, while a holiday might consist of the Shorbagy parents taking time off to travel to the El Gouna International in Egypt.

Mrs Shorbagy is also still learning the art of managing professional players. Squash has yet to catch the eye of the big corporate sponsors, as far as players are concerned, and even with two pros in her family, it is a difficult path to tread.

“It’s not easy,” she admits. “It depends on relationships and the Egyptian federation also doesn’t pay anything for my sons.” Still, this is but a small barrier for a mother termed as a “management machine” by Hadrian Stiff, the brothers’ coach in Bristol.

With Mohamed fresh from a world final and Marwan beginning his first full year on the PSA World Tour, what, then, are the immediate hopes for this year?

It doesn’t take long for the answer to come: “For Mohamed to be in the top four and Marwan to learn, learn and learn – and to have more experience on tour. He has only just begun his PSA career, so it is all about win and lose, win and lose, and to gain experience. It is not important for him to be in the top 20 or 30 or any ranking.”

And what of that Williams sisters’ comparison? We know that she has aspirations for her sons to be the top two in the world, but when pressed, you realise that this isn’t just a “dream”.

“I really believe in them and I feel like they have enough talent,” she says. “They need to work very, very hard to reach this level. It needs time to work.”

As for presiding over her sons’ career paths and what may lie ahead, Mrs Shorbagy admits to “not being nervous at the moment”. Just like a certain Mr Richard Williams, then, who has presided over Venus’ and Serena’s incredible careers.



Mohamed El Shorbagy (centre) hugs his mother Basma and brother Marwan

Stiff schedule for Shorbagy brothers

Elite Squash’s Hadrian Stiff, coach to the Shorbagy brothers in Bristol, details his regime for Mohamed and Marwan

I think a lot of young professional players would be quite surprised how simple the daily routine generally is for the brothers. There is no special plan or schedule each week and on occasions a trip to the shops or cinema will replace training if mind or body do not feel healthy. But when they train, they train hard. Most of their on-court sessions involve a lot of full-court and length-based games, plus many hours of solo practice each week.

Very rarely will I see them performing routines in straight lines or with any real structure, but what I do notice is an enjoyment of clean ball-striking and rhythmical flowing squash, which regularly escalates to an extremely high tempo when they play each other. Mohamed, especially, is very comfortable and clear about what works for him and will often be seen at the University of the West of England courts late at night practising alone.

I think Bristol has a very positive influence on the brothers. Firstly, it is quite anonymous for them. Nobody is looking at what they do or how they do it. I think they benefit from the interaction with young people at the university who are not involved in squash.

They are both their own people and would not respond well to a rigid system. This is partly why the Bristol set-up is so ideal. They use the courts, gym and physiotherapy team at UWE, and also spar with the professional players based here, which include Lucas Serme and Arthur Gaskin. Our lessons are split between UWE and the Bristol Lawn Tennis and Squash Club, where Elite Squash has

its base, and the club also kindly support professional players by allowing free court usage during the day.

When coaching, I focus on the areas which will make the most difference individually to their short and long-term successes. I believe movement fluency and function to be the most important elements in order to dominate the sport long term, and this is my main area of expertise. In every session we spend anything from 30 to 90 minutes going through specific balance and stability routines, plus agility and timing movement drills, which are tailored to each player and their needs.

These routines lead into fast-paced feeding patterns with emphasis on ease of movement and hitting. Occasionally, I will add some technical input regarding swing shape or racket preparation, but on the whole swing technique is left alone, with more emphasis on the quality of the process from start to finish. Top 10 players are potentially more prone to injuries as their matches continue to get faster and more attacking, so never have a well-functioning body and smooth movement been so vital to survive such an intensive sport.

The Shorbagy brothers have taught me a lot about coaching and top-level squash, and will continue to do so. The young players of Bristol are also privileged to be playing in the city during this exciting era and being able to watch and learn such exciting squash. My ultimate goal is to see them reach no.1 and 2 in the world. In what order will be up to them!