

What the legends say

Richard Eaton previews the biggest event on the men's professional world squash calendar in the company of four former world champions

THE VENUE

Bellevue, which is Seattle's largest suburb, edges Lake Washington and offers the Meydenbauer Convention Center for the first World Championship ever held in the United States.

This landmark venue is said to possess a unity of opposites - large enough for a festival atmosphere and intimate enough for spectators to appreciate close-up viewing.

THE DATES

There are two rounds of qualifying - on November 13 and 14 - at the Pro Sports Club in Bellevue, before the main tournament gets underway at the Meydenbauer with the top half of the first round on November 15.

The bottom half of the first round follows a day later and the second round is also played over two days before the third round on November 19, the quarter-finals on November 20, the semi-finals on November 21 and the final on November 22.

THE COURT

An ASB brand, apparently the one purchased by Canada for last year's Women's World Team Championship.

THE DRAW

Top-seeded Mohamed Elshorbagy's toughest test could be a semi-final with Greg Gaultier, who beat him at the U.S. Open, but might even have a semi with Max Lee, of Hong Kong, his conqueror at the China Open.

Gaultier may have a quarter-final with Simon Rosner, who held match points against Nick Matthew in September.

The second-seeded Matthew's predicted semi-final opponent is Ramy Ashour, but first the Englishman may need to get past the nimble Tarek Momen in the quarters.

THE HISTORY

The Men's World Championship began in 1976 and its inaugural champion was the great Australian, Geoff Hunt, who won it four times. His achievement has been superseded only twice, by two extraordinary Pakistanis - Jahangir Khan, six times the champion, and Jansher Khan, whose eight titles are a record.

Courts with three or four transparent walls have increasingly been used since the 1990s, exploiting photogenic venues such as the Giza pyramids, Hong Kong harbour and Green Island in Kuwait.

THE BUILD-UP

Nothing has loomed as unpredictably - or as expensively - as the whopping \$3,478

bill presented to Ramy Ashour for an MRI scan during the U.S. Open. Nothing is certain for him any more.

The Egyptian won his comeback tournament, the NetSuite Open, in San Francisco in September after five months out. A month later he was paying for a costly hamstring injury following a bewildering second-round retirement in Philadelphia after only seven points.

When Ramy can play again is unknown

even to him. Somehow he won the last World Championship when palpably injured, having previously withdrawn from the British Open at the last moment.

Meanwhile, Mohamed Elshorbagy has had an up-and-down build-up too, winning the British Grand Prix in September, beating two other leading contenders in Greg Gaultier and Nick Matthew, but only after sensationally losing in the first round of the China Open to world no.13 Max Lee.

Ramy Ashour, the eventual winner, goes on the attack against fellow Egyptian Mohamed Elshorbagy in the 2014 World Championship final, one of the most dramatic ever





Amr Shabana - world champion 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009

Mohamed Elshorbagy is a monster of a squash player! Physically his strength is up

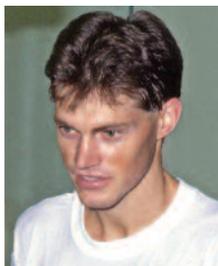
there with the athletes in any sport. He is also a really smart player, which is dangerous.

Nick Matthew always had a tight English game, then developed strength and speed. When he learned to attack, he became a fine volleyer, standing high on the T. To beat him you have to move him around.

We all know Greg Gaultier - very explosive, strong and puts the ball away. He is most meticulous. Anyone wanting to know what it takes to be an athlete should watch Greg train.

Ramy (Ashour) is up there with the best ever squash players in his ball control ability. He is fast and flexible, and has done a lot of training, especially after a major knee operation. He's very calculating. People who don't know him might not see that.

Winning a World Championship is about small details. I've seen many won or lost by one point. Whoever reaches the final fresh will probably win.



Rodney Martin - world champion 1991

If Ramy is fit and motivated and has done decent training, he is the best player. But he is injury-prone, so

that gives everyone a chance. You never know what will happen with his body.

I don't know if Matthew still has the ability to beat two or three (top players) in a row any more. Probably something has to happen to other guys for him to win the title. If he has a tough draw, he might struggle to beat two guys.

Gaultier is fragile mentally and most of the top players understand that. He is talented but fragile at certain stages of a match, where he could turn matches around.

Elshorbagy is physically strong and determined to win, but I am not sure about him. When he plays at a fast tempo, it works against most players if he does it well. But it's one dimensional and it won't work against Ramy. He may need to think a bit differently.

I don't see other contenders because there is a gap between the top four and the others.



Thierry Lincou - world champion 2004

Gaultier is in very good form, having been injury-free for a while. The World Championship is the only (big) one he hasn't won, but his movement, power, precision

and experience give him great tools to do it.

Elshorbagy came very close to the title, as Greg has a few times, and he now has more and more experience and maturity. He has an amazing combination of power, shots, aggression and determination.

I think Nick Matthew will peak for the World Championship. He has so much knowledge of the game and his longevity is incredible, but it may not be as easy at 35 to play hard matches back to back.

When Ramy is on and injury-free, we all know he is a danger for everyone. He seems to see the game and anticipate better than his rivals, and has a great attitude, with shots from another world!

I think this quartet have equal chances, which is exciting. Winning is often down to details. I saved a few match balls to win in 2004, Palmer did the same (twice), and last year's final between Ramy and Shorbagy could have gone either way. So there's no favourite.



Ross Norman - world champion 1986

Elshorbagy was very unlucky not to win the last worlds and I am not sure Ramy can do that again. I think Elshorbagy will

take it this time. He's young and hungry, and after being pipped at the post last year, he has a point to make.

Ramy is an unknown quantity even to himself. He is the best player if he stays injury-free. But I'd say Elshorbagy has a better chance.

The circumstances have to be special for Gaultier or Matthew to win. I saw Matthew beat Elshorbagy at the British Open, but he was not worth tuppence the next day. A lot of guys at 34 wouldn't want to know about that again because it hurt. I think Gaultier is a little bit better, but it is almost too late. He could have won much more.

Between the top two there is little. Then there is a gap. There isn't much difference between the next two and then there is a drop.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Amr Shabana lives in Toronto, but has become director of Egypt's national teams, and will spend three summer months there. "What they need is for someone to be available at any time, for injury or training or techniques," he said. "It's something I never had."

Rodney Martin coaches at Greenwich in the United States, but has his own club with eight courts back home in Australia. He also has a partnership with McWil squash courts, which he hopes "will be part of a new squash revolution in Australia that will help produce some decent players again."

Thierry Lincou is head coach at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where recruiting is a challenge "because I need to find great squash players with an excellent academic standard." He also coaches Amanda Sobhy, the world no.11 from the USA, which keeps him connected with the top level.

Ross Norman is a property manager near London. He likes cycling and works out regularly, but only plays two or three squash matches a year. Despite this, he competes in the British Open Masters every five years when he reaches a new age group - "just so I can win a new title!" he says.

THE KEY TO WORLD SUCCESS

Amr Shabana's triumph at the 2007 World Championship in Bermuda was the culmination of a remarkable winning sequence of five tournaments, which looked to be too tiring to achieve. "It was the best I ever played, because that season I was injury-free. That was the key," he says.

Rodney Martin remains the only player to beat the top three players en route to the world title, overcoming title holder Jansher Khan in the quarters, Chris Dittmar in the semis and Jahangir Khan in the final at Adelaide in 1991. "I'd beaten them all before, but only by getting past Jansher quickly was it possible to beat all three in the same tournament," he said.

Thierry Lincou saved a match point to win the 2004 world final against English top seed Lee Beachill in Doha, despite having to play three successive five-game matches. "Keeping media work to a minimum helped a lot," Lincou said. It enabled him to atone for 2003, when he did a long PR session the night before the final and lost.

Ross Norman won the most famous final of all in 1986 at Toulouse, where he ended Jahangir's unbeaten run of five years and seven months. "I said I'd travel to the ends of the earth just to beat him once," Norman commented. He learned that even legends occasionally have days when they are not legendary.