

DESSOUKY v FARAG

Ian McKenzie casts his forensic eye back over the most significant men's match of 2020 as Fares Dessouky came of age

Ali Farag is light, strong, moves fast and easily, gets the balls back, minimises mistakes and so is very hard to beat. At the Black Ball Open just before Christmas, Fares Dessouky found a way to do it. What was it?

Most matches are won and lost on mistakes, so this is perhaps the first thing we should look at, starting with Farag's errors per game: 2, 2, 4, 0, 3. His error rate is low but it crept up in the crucial third.

Dessouky's errors per game were: 6, 6, 5, 5, 5. Although this is on the high side (and double Farag's rate) it was stable. He didn't implode or plummet into long reels of mistakes.

Considering the winning shots is highly instructive. Dessouky hit significantly more winners. In the remarkable fourth game, Dessouky hit 11 winners while his opponent made zero errors. Amazing!

Squash Player once asked Hashim Khan (the seven times British Open winner and father of the modern game) his advice for squash players. One thing he said was: "Any time your opponent plays a good shot, there must be a reason – you have given him the chance to play a good shot. Don't do it again!"

Squash is of course a rallying sport and it is within these rallies that we wait for (and

try to force) opportunities to play a winner. In this match Dessouky rallied well, matched his opponent, hit length, volleyed to keep the middle when he could and his variation of pace was exceptional. His straight lobs were excellent and he neutralised, to some extent, his opponent's great advantages.

Farag floats around the court Peter Pan style, taking the ball early on the rise when he can. He feels the pace of the ball and moves it into the gaps. It is all efficiently facilitated by short swings. It is a game of working the ball. However, he could be tighter. There were opportunities for Dessouky there.

Dessouky's 35 winners were from a whole variety of shots: 15 on the volley and seven kills. His forehand kill is a particularly formidable weapon.

In looking at the reasons behind the final points we can consider a whole range of factors; tactics is one and another is the mental game – an area pertinent to Dessouky.

In the first game, Dessouky was slightly over-eager, played with no margins and had less time on the T. In the second, leading 8-7, he disrupted himself with the referee, seeking a stroke but receiving a no let.

The referee was perhaps wrong, but it was a microscopic disruption that gave his opponent momentum. His tactical error and mistake at 8-10 could be put down to that disruption. Dessouky left the court frustrated and two games down. It looked like a case of 'here we go again'.

CIB BLACK BALL OPEN MEN'S FINAL

Fares Dessouky bt Ali Farag
5-11, 8-11, 11-7, 11-8, 11-8 (73 min)

Dessouky was still a little frustrated in the third, tinned on a tactical error at 2-1 and tinned again off a clinging ball to go 4-1 down. At 2/0 and 4-1 down his prospects didn't look good. However, from there he pulled off victory in the most notable performance of the year.

Farag lost momentum. Perhaps mentally distracted by the cooling ball, he failed to impose himself in the rallies and press home his advantage. It drifted away.

A new ball, a new game, a new Dessouky. Tactically he was excellent here with his high balls giving him time. Farag's brilliant speed, reading and moving of the ball with deception were in evidence, but there were enough loose shots to provide opportunities for his opponent. Dessouky hit 11 winners in one game – against the world no.1!

In the fifth Farag confused himself when appealing a 'no let'. As the tension built, he mishit on the penultimate point, then Dessouky scored with a clinging backhand drop to seal a famous win and his first major title.

Dessouky, who in the past had been a class player unfulfilled and undermined mentally, had come good. Farag will wonder whether his opponents will study this match and see how to play him tactically. Not many of them, however, will be as good at taking their opportunities as his opponent on this day.

Dessouky was fined and disciplined in his previous tournament, the Qatar Classic, for basically a mental implosion. Money well spent it seems. This is a fascinating match to watch on Squash TV. Have this analysis to hand when you do so.

Editor's note: *Dessouky may be interested in reading Frank Sanderson's brilliant article on Frustration Tolerance on the Squash Player website's Workshop' section and the comments about margin for error in our Tactics series (2018, Issue 3).*



GAME	ERRORS					WINNERS				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Dessouky	6	6	5	5	5	3	6	7	11	8
Farag	2	2	4	0	3	5	5	2	3	3