

# "SOMETIMES I FEEL I HATE THE SPORT..."

*In an interview conducted just before his recent six-week ban, Mostafa Asal speaks to Ian McKenzie about mental toughness, pressure, criticism and his love of football*

**Mostafa Asal, world no.1 at just 21 years old, almost didn't get into squash. Football was his first love. Even now as he devotes six days a week to squash training (two hours a day on court and one and a half hours of strength, footwork and bike work) he fits in two games of five-a-side football a week.**

There are great dangers to squash players flirting with other sports. Readers may remember the story of Chris Dittmar, the second best player in the world, who was invited to his rugby league club in Adelaide to share training experiences and injured himself in some 'competitive work.' It put him out for over a year and necessitated the removal of over 60 pieces of broken bone from his knee.

Perhaps too, they remember the story of Ross Norman (later to be world champion) who loved the idea of parachuting when he was a young top 10 player, suffered a bad landing downwind and the surgeons said he would never play squash again.

Asal realises football is probably unwise but says with a laugh: "When I am playing, my friends move away!" Imagine the fuss if they injured him! "Yes, that would be it. But I love it. I can't stop," he chuckles.

Asal's love of football, however, does not stop there. The video game FIFA is his favourite hobby. He and travelling coach Hazem Abouel Soud are in the FIFA Elite Division. It keeps Asal out of trouble (off court, anyway). "I play online with a group," he reveals. "We connect worldwide. You can play with someone in another country. It is big." Indeed, in 2021, the FIFA series had sold over 325 million units.

Asal looks up to three players who have influenced him: Mohamed ElShorbagy, Karim Abdel Gawad and Gregory Gaultier.

Gawad was the senior player kind enough to give him practice hits. "He went from being about no.20, when he was not good enough, to quickly becoming world no.1 – and a super player," says an admiring Asal.

"He was coached by my old coach Mohammed Abbas for three or four years. As a kid, we went to watch and cheer him on. In 2016 he became world champion against Ramy [Ashour] and we were able to share his joy in that moment."

On Mohamed ElShorbagy, he says: "My friends and I used to go to the El Gouna event and cheer Mohamed on. I admired his fighting spirit and how mentally he was so strong. I would love to be similar to him and do what he has achieved through the years."



Gaultier he admired for his mental game: "He kept playing and fighting with the Egyptians. He kept his body in condition even when he was 37." There was one more thing he liked about Gaultier: "His celebrations."

Asal has developed acrobatic and outrageous celebration routines of his own that, for some older spectators, may seem a bit out of place.

However, they are not unusual in sport. England rugby player Owen Farrell and Olympic gold medal-winning runner Mo Farah have famous celebration gestures. Football, of course, has its signature celebrations: index finger to lips, shaping the fingers for a heart, knee slides, pointing to the sky, dancing, praying etc.

***"I am a big football fan and I thought, 'Why can't squash [celebrations] be like this?' says Asal. 'We tend to keep it all inside. We need to change the sport to market it for the new generation. It is something I love to do. I will not change,' he says defiantly.***

Asal's wild and often bizarre celebrations first came to prominence at the 2020 Egyptian Open. He ripped off his shirt and threw it into the crowd after his victory over Paul Coll. Coll also got a little 'off the ball' nudge. It certainly 'wasn't cricket' as the English say. We're certainly not used to it in squash.

"We haven't seen anything like him since the days of Ahmed Barada," says the PSA's Lee Beachill.

Asal's antics are from a different culture and a different generation. He's a showman. But some see it as disrespectful and he most certainly has his detractors. The behaviour is one thing, but the aggressive playing style, physical contact and interference are becoming an almost intractable issue.

Asal is not a self-critical young man. He does not see the problem as technical. He doesn't see himself as playing too close to opponents or coming off the ball straight. He says there are systemic conflicts within the sport. He is non-specific and says he can't elaborate.

"There are a lot of conflicts in the game that need to be resolved," he says. "It is not the referee's fault, it is the system. The system



Asal performs a trademark dancing celebration at the Canary Wharf Classic



all soon," he warns. "It is a huge story. Maybe I have 60/40 supporters or 40/60 supporters, but when I speak out, they will all be my supporters. I would like the video to go on Netflix."

Perhaps it is in the genes. Mostafa's father was a professional footballer who played for the famous Al Ahly Sporting Club and the Egyptian national team. He has also been banned for a year by the PSA from spectating at his son's matches.

"Sometimes I feel I hate the sport because of what is happening," he reveals. "I am not playing for the love of it. I will try to concentrate for the one hour I have to play and after that, not talk or think about squash. That is not good vibes. You need to love your sport."

This is a very different kind of world no.1. He is still a very young player mixing it with his idols. I ask, who are his rivals? "All the top five. It is a pleasure to play this generation, because it is not my generation at all," says Asal. "When I thought about this, I decided to think that I was the same age as them. If you are thinking you are 21 and you are playing with the legends of the game in their 30s, you will never play, so I am thinking I am 28 or 29."

This is an interesting little mental trick. Perhaps there will be a few more mental adjustments for this young man as he grows up in the glare of judgement from the sport's fans, players and authorities across the world. We await the revelations.

**NEXT ISSUE:** The making of a world no.1. We investigate Asal's squash upbringing as he admits, 'I wasn't very good and wanted to give up!'

➤ needs to be changed. As world no.1 I am saying the system needs to be changed for the squash community, for the sport I love."

What changes would he like to see? "For there not to be a lot of conflict in squash. There is a lot of conflict in squash in one area. I will speak about this very soon, but I don't want to reveal it now."

To take a different tack, I ask him what is the best part of his game. "My mental game," says Asal. "Are you sure?" I ask. We laugh, but he is adamant. "Yes, there are lots of things going on, but I am still producing the best squash. I am still learning lots of things."

"I need to not be over-hyped a bit. I can get too hyped because of what is happening around me. I need to be hyped to get into the momentum of the game. If everything around is OK, then I will not be over-hyped. I love to play hyped, but I know I need to moderate it slightly."

So Asal may need to tweak his mental game a bit to get the right level on the 'arousal curve' (I explain the Yerkes-Dodson Law and draw it on a piece of paper. He folds it up and takes it away to study).

For now, he is withstanding the pressures and perceived conspiracies around him to play outstanding squash and remain at world no.1. There have been a number of difficult matches and opponents who, unusually, have gone public with their criticism of him and his playing style. He feels unsupported and victimised.

"There is a huge conflict in squash," he says. "I question the support [within it] for me. Even without it I became world no.1 and am super proud of myself."

***"It is a fashion in squash to over-react to contact to try and get a penalty. Players know I am going to beat them at squash so they are coming up with disruptive tactics. It is not just one player, it has evolved to most players. It is not helpful for squash to try to win points and conduct strokes."***

"In football, when a player falls or dives trying to get a penalty, the referee can give them a yellow card and then a red card. That would never happen in squash. In squash there is no downside to diving."

But it is not just the on-court difficulties that seem to worry him. He feels constrained and under pressure.

"There are a lot of things that can get into your head before you get on court," he says. "You get emails and criticism; you face possible suspension. It is weird. I got a two-month suspension, but there was an agreement that neither side speak about it. It is unfair. I haven't seen another squash player in that position."

**The PSA issued this statement in January 2022:**

*"Mostafa Asal has accepted a two-month suspension from the PSA, following on-court disciplinary matters."*

*Mr Asal apologises for his conduct and will be working with the PSA moving forward to ensure that such issues do not reoccur."*

*Neither the PSA nor Mr Asal will be making any further comment on this matter."*

Whether it's this or other concerns, something is eating Asal. "I will speak about it



*Asal studies the big screen waiting for the result of a decision review*