

MY GAME: JAMES WILLSTROP

James Willstrop, Yorkshire's former world no.1 and current England international, talks to Squash Player Editor Ian McKenzie about many aspects of his game and his goals

What is your favourite shot?

Any shot that wins a rally. One that suits me well, though, and I feel comfortable playing is the backhand drop shot. Often I play it down the left flank, but really I can play it from anywhere, including from the back.

What is your favourite practice?

One I use a lot when working with Malcolm [Willstrop, James' father and coach] is 'threes'. It is a bit unusual, but it gives me time to practise particular things. You play a game with three players each having a turn [A plays, then B, then C, then A again and so on]. The non-striker has to back out of the way a bit, but it is not difficult. I like it because there is spontaneity about it.

What work do your practice sessions involve?

I try to mix my sessions. Each day is completely different. Often with Malcolm I will work on the hitting of the ball. That's the priority with him. He sets up the sessions really well and works people into them. It is different every day with different people and different practices. Malcolm uses a lot of practices that other people don't use – the 'threes' I've explained is just one of them. He brings in different conditions. Yes, we do routines, like 'alley work' [rallying down one side], but it is a bit more spontaneous with him – he encourages players to develop through games. Another example is 'two against one'.

Sometimes we just play games. I'll work with the players who are there. He has the ability to work very good players in with lesser players and make conditions that work for everyone – this week I have been working with Sarah Kippax and Madeline Perry. The standard thing is no barrier at all. I work with whoever he puts me on with and the sessions are great. I see David Champion a couple of times a week and was with him and 'Robbo' [national

coach Chris Robertson] last week. Their sessions [at Halifax or Manchester] use more structured routines. I work with David on court and maybe he will push me physically.

What work does your fitness training involve?

This is a bloody hard sport and most of the squash sessions involve some physical discomfort. There is crossover. Some of the squash sessions with 'Camps' [David Champion] or Malcolm are very physical indeed. You have to push your body because you are going to feel it in a match against Nick Matthew, Ramy Ashour, [Amr] Shabana, [Mohamed] Elshorbagy or [Greg] Gaultier. I work on strength and conditioning in the gym with Mark Campbell in

Sheffield every week. He monitors what I am doing. He sets my sessions for me and plans them out. Mainly I work with Mark, but a lot of athletes now are looking at other things as well as gym work – for example yoga, rehab with the physio, treatments, massage, anything you can do to make yourself better.

How many sessions do you do a week?

It depends on the time of year. In February and March I was

travelling and playing in Chicago and Richmond [Virginia, USA]. It is difficult then to put in consistent training because you have to travel and rest before events. You can't work too hard two days before an event. In the last two or three weeks I've got into a routine again, which is a lovely thing. You get to stay at home and concentrate on some real dedicated training – at least a couple of sessions a day. Sometimes you will do more volume but easier work – for example yoga, solo practice and stretching – so that it will not exhaust you. But then on another day I may do an hour of absolute high intensity and may not do a lot more that day. Each day is different.

Do you have a heavy day of training and a light day?

Not at the moment. I am five days heavy and the weekends are the time to recover, a bit like a tournament. In another period I may do two really tough days, a recovery day and then go again.

In practice games are there particular things you try to do?

This changes from time to time. Sometimes if you have been concentrating all week on particular things you just want to let yourself go and play. On another day it may be a good idea to play a practice game and home in on the things you are trying to work on. Sometimes I might want to, for example, work on my ability to break

the game up. On another I may focus on something really specific. Say if I am not happy with my backhand length off the back wall, I could go into a match and try to focus on that.

What opportunities do you look for in a match?

Every shot is taken on its merits.

What are your strengths as a player?

Mental toughness, racket skills and tactical awareness.

Do you have key tactics when you play?

Each time you go into a match it has got to be with some preparation, knowledge or some idea of what you want to try and do. It doesn't have to be complicated. It can be a few words, but it should be clear in your head. If you want to go more deeply into it, you could write down the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent; how you will play him, what things you will be thinking, how you will react if particular things happen – sort of pre-empting it all. I tend not to write stuff down, but you can. Sometimes I make notes. They have to be short. In squash you have no time. It is frantic. You are in the heat of battle. There is no way you can keep thinking about loads of things. You need a clear outlook and a clear plan. As an example, if I went in against someone who had a fantastic forehand volley nick, I would know to keep the ball away from that and get it wide there. I could write that down – say 'width on the forehand side' or 'don't give opportunities on the forehand side'. Maybe use key words so you are not encumbered with lots of stuff while you are trying to play a match. I've tried different ways, like just walking on court, but really some sort of plan or structure is useful. For me, a

planning, some pre-thought is a good thing.

What are the parts of your game you are trying to develop?

Do you want another book? That is an impossible thing to answer. There is always some little change right down to just changing the pace of a certain shot.

Why did you decide not to play in the El Gouna International?

I've just been playing a lot and I think it was the right decision not to go. At Canary Wharf I was lagging a bit physically. When you play for a month and a half people think you are fit, but I think I lose something. I saw it coming. We have a big summer with the British Open and the Commonwealth Games. They are miles more important than anything else. I would love to have gone and played El Gouna, but I needed to sacrifice that and put my efforts into these two, give myself a training block and give myself time at home.

What are your goals for the rest of the year?

To keep playing, keep injury-free and keep enjoying what I am doing. I feel lucky to be able to play and I love what I am doing. I want to get myself into position to play events and to try and better myself. I want to play well

and, if possible, win the British Open, the Commonwealth Games and the World Championship. But really, in essence, I am trying to make myself a really good squash player.

Do you have a tip for the ambitious player?

Improvement at squash takes a lot of practice, so work hard and practise hard. Watch the best players play.

few simple ideas or key words can work – for example 'get length', 'keep calm between points'. This just means I have a plan when I go on court and I know what the key ideas are, and know what I am trying to achieve. Some