

Rosner's game matures

Simon Rosner tells Rod Gilmour how he has become the first German man to reach the world's top 10

Simon Rosner is nicknamed the 'German tree-chopper' on the PSA World Tour, but he has been felled several times during his pursuit of a place in the world's top 10.

There have been certain ranking positions that Germany's perennial no.1 remembers all too well: the 60s, 30s and

then six months at world no.11. They were three sets of numbers that took a while to "shake off".

However, last November came the breakthrough, when he won his eighth PSA Tour title at the Edmonton Open, defeating Egyptian Tarek Momen over five games for the biggest win of his career. It came just weeks after he

finally broke into the top 10.

"I've never had any big ranking jumps, but I'm happy with that," he says ahead of the Canary Wharf Classic, where he is seeded fourth and is now seen as a leading contender for the first time. "My body is accustomed to the success, so it's never felt like it's getting a shock by rising too quickly in the rankings."

Rosner is now the highest-ranked male German squash player of all time – having surpassed the previous best listing



Rosner playing for Germany against England's Nick Matthew in the World Team Championship

of 12th registered by Hansi Wiens in 1993 – and is closing in on the overall record of sixth achieved by Sabine Schoene in 1997.

He still has time on his side too, though plenty of squash aficionados have wrongly presumed that the German is at the tail end of his career. “I’m still quite young, but people think I’m much older, as I have been hanging around for quite a while now,” Rosner quips.

Indeed, he has been playing PSA tournaments across the globe since he was 16½. The story goes that 35-year-old Amr Shabana had to ask Rosner recently if he really was only 27. “Simon, I thought you were as old as me because you’ve been playing so long!” the great Egyptian joked.

Rosner first started playing squash at the age of four with his brother, who later chose table tennis as his profession. After finishing school, Rosner went into the German Army for basic training and it was hard, as he was the youngest recruit by two years, but the experience toughened him up physically for his pro squash career.

He has lived in Paderborn, in the northern Rhine, since leaving the Army. His good friend Stefan Leifels was Germany’s no.1 and based there at the time, so Rosner decided a move was his best option. He explained: “The way the club is set up is so professional. I had offers from all the German clubs, but Paderborn was always where I wanted to be – to live, train and focus on squash.

“I was told when I was younger that I needed to go to Holland or England to get better, but I have never wanted to move away from Germany, because you’ll never be successful if you live somewhere where you don’t feel comfortable, even if you have the best training partners in the world.”

Having entered the top 10, Rosner believes he made the right decision to move a decade ago and will continue to train in Paderborn until he retires. He may not be recognised in Berlin, but Rosner has all the trappings of success in Paderborn and is recognised daily due to the local newspaper covering squash, though Paderborners tend to “keep themselves to themselves”.

“I also get noticed in odd places across the globe,” he said. “On the way home from Edmonton at Calgary airport, a fan recognised me in the gents’ loo! He turned around, looked at me for 10 seconds and told me he was a huge fan of mine. In the underground in London I have also been recognised a few times. Squash players get recognised in some weird places!”

Back home, Rosner has no need for public transport, as he has a sponsored Mercedes-Benz car. The faster the better, he says, admitting that he is soon to trade in his current Merc for another one “with more horsepower”.



Top: The centre of Paderborn

Bottom: Paderborn, Rosner’s home club

“I’m German, so I am actually a bit of a car freak,” he says. “I love speed, so I’m going for an AMG A45 with 360 horsepower. Once I get that, I will go to a test ring and drive it with the professionals. Now that will be pretty good fun!”

The 27-year-old now has to cope with the speed and verve of squash’s top 10. He is well prepared for the onslaught, though, having had a Pakistani coach for eight years in Zulfiqar Ali Khan, with whom he learnt a different game to

anyone else in Germany at the time. He then took on an Egyptian coach, Wael El Batran, for three years.

“I learnt to be aggressive and to play my shots from an early age,” he says. “I think the squash of the future will be fast-paced and will only go more and more in that direction.”

Rosner will have to live up to his tree-chopping moniker if he is to succeed. “I’ve had a big swing on my forehand ever since I was a small boy,” he laughs. “It was something my old German national coach tried to take out of my game. He said it was too big and that I wasted too much time.

“As a kid, I didn’t have the power in my arms, so I made up for it by raising my racket quite high and hitting low down on the ball. I just carried on with it, even when I found the power.”

Rosner admits that he has yet to reach his full potential, but he was heartened by Squash Player’s recent coaches’ survey on the likely top five by 2020, with two of them choosing him as a top-five player.

The German, who is currently coached by Finn Tomi Niinimäki, says: “Hopefully most of those coaches are right and that I do manage it. That is my next aim. But first I must stabilise my ranking. I feel like there is more in me and as long I am injury-free, then I have every chance.”

So far Rosner has not suffered any serious injuries in his career. After 10 years on the professional circuit, the longest he has spent out of the game is a startling “couple of days” and he admits that staying so healthy is a rare commodity among the game’s leading players.

“I have never had a proper injury, perhaps only a muscle tear for two days,” he recalls. “It is something I can be proud of that I have never been out of the game for a long period. My aim is to be injury-free for the rest of my career.”

WHAT THEY SAY

Paderborn squash manager Norman Farthing: Simon is a very focused and single-minded individual, who has always looked destined for the top since he joined Paderborn SC as a teenager. He is one of the most dedicated and hard-working professional athletes I know. His daily training schedules contain lung-bursting physical conditioning training, monotonous hours of racket skills and meticulous planning of his travel arrangements. He enjoys playing a fast and furious game. However, he has the immense ability to finish hard-fought rallies with his soft hands and produces some delightful, delicate shots. Although he is an extremely fair player, one can also spot him having a chat with the officials regularly! Off court, though, he is a real gentleman. Through the heritage of his parents, who are bakers, he also enjoys a piece of cake after his afternoon naps between sessions. But this doesn’t stop his major ambition: to get to the very top.

Paderborn team-mate Tim Garner: He is a great team player and thrives on the competition environment. However, as soon as one event is over, he is always keen to get back home to his home and training to get ready for the next one. Although Paderborn may be a relatively small town, it has a sporting ethos and is the ideal base for a squash pro, as seen by the fact that he is based there along with most of the top German players.