

Behind the trojan

Rod Gilmour examines 'Team Matthew' – the men behind the success of England's double world champion, Nick Matthew



THE PLAYER

NICK MATTHEW

This is a list that makes you stop and shudder at its sheer brilliance. From Geoff Hunt's opening four titles, the imperious Jahangir and Jansher Khan's victories of the 1980s and early 90s, through the rivalry of Jonathon Power and Peter Nicol, and, lately, the coolness of Amr Shabana's four titles in seven years. Those grand names of world champions over the last 35 years reveal a roll-call of squash deity.

“

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”

Mark Bawden

To that end, we can add Nick Matthew, who became the first Englishman to win the crown in 2010 when he beat rival and compatriot James Willstrop. Matthew then followed that success by beating Gregory Gaultier in last year's final in Rotterdam to become the first Briton to record back-to-back world titles. A third in Qatar at the end of the year would propel the already-garlanded Yorkshireman to further heights. He would become only the fourth player to have won the trophy three times.

The British Open champion is on a mission. It is no secret that Matthew has organised his year around another world-title tilt in Doha in December. This is the one he wants. Why? He's achieved everything else there is to win, not to mention multiple weeks as world no.1. And who would have bet against either a Matthew or Willstrop gold medal at the London 2012 Olympics? It would have given Team GB a rounded gold-medal haul of 30.

“

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Mark Campbell

So what's the secret behind his success? Well, Matthew has been helped in no part by his residing in Yorkshire, where he has been well catered for at the English Institute of Sport, as well as by long-serving coach David Pearson.

It is a set-up that the 32-year-old says he feels comfortable and relaxed with. Squash Player went behind the scenes to reveal the work of his backroom team and the extraordinary mindset of a player bidding for that historic third consecutive World Open crown.



THE COACH

DAVID PEARSON

Trust, honesty and growing together – these are the elements that have cemented the relationship between Matthew and Pearson, who has been the Englishman's coach for the last 15 years. "As the years go by, if you can mould those three, then you are well set," says Pearson as his charge embarks on another season on the PSA World Tour.

In the early days it was just coach and player, but modern science has seen the EIS play a significant part in Matthew's career in recent years. As with any close relationship, there is also the sense of a third-party element getting in the way. "My team," Matthew has said to Pearson during conversation. "Team? I'm not in your team!" Pearson jokes. It is seemingly thus for Pearson: cut the science and strip out the psychoanalysis – it's what happens between coach and player that really matters.

"That is always the basis of a relationship and success," says Pearson. "Rhythm and movement, tactical and technical play is covered between Nick and myself. It basically boils down to a two-way street between coach and athlete.

"If you look at the way he plays now in terms of physical play and shots such as his lob, that's just the squash really."

To give some clarity as to how the pair's relationship has strengthened, we only have to cast our minds back to the British Open final in May. With back-to-back matches in the latter stage of tournaments these days, there is rarely time to analyse opponents on a laptop (as the tennis elite might do). So Pearson and Matthew "just sat on a bed together in the hotel" and concocted their master plan on the morning of the final at London's O2.

"When he beat Ramy Ashour, there were three definite, simple tactics that destroyed him really. It forced a confused Ramy into a number of errors. It paid off like a million dollars," Pearson recalled.

Amazingly, the main tactic that saw Matthew win 3-0 was one initiated by Rafael Alarcon, the 35-year-old Brazilian player. He stayed with Pearson for two weeks last year and suggested one piece of advice to Pearson after seeing Matthew play at the British Grand Prix in Manchester. Pearson had remembered thinking about it in previous years, but admitted it had been forgotten over time. "Rafael tweaked the tactic if you like," he said.

When Matthew is not playing the PSA Tour, he will travel over to Harrogate as part of his regular contact with Pearson, spending four to five hours there with him over the morning and afternoon.

There are usually two or three issues that come out of any given tournament and will stick in Matthew's memory. Pearson is open about them, revealing:



"On the backhand, his follow-through doesn't extend properly and follow through. Sometimes his forehand comes around the ball on his drop shot, while his wrist becomes a little bit cocked on the volley and backhand drop.

"At the end of a session we try and put a bit of technical work into his short game and make it more subtle. Previously, he couldn't put it into practice, as his technique was letting him down. Now he can put this into his game thanks to his skills."

Pearson first saw Matthew play when he was 12 and started coaching him five years later. He admits that Matthew is not easy to coach at times. "But that is because there is so much of his game that

is pure professionalism," he says.

"It started out with me being the dominant force, as Nick was quite backward in many areas. As the years have progressed, though, the relationship has become more equal."

Having spent a whole career together, Pearson has clearly committed himself to the player like a father to a son. Pearson says it is a "key ingredient" that most other coaches miss out on.

Pearson sums up his charge by saying: "His skills are so subtle that unless you are an out-and-out squash aficionado, you just don't realise what's going on. On top of his physicality, that is a dangerous combination. He is now virtually looking like a complete player."





FEATURE

THE PSYCHOLOGIST

MARK BAWDEN

Matthew had just won the 2009 British Open after that legendary and tempestuous final against Willstrop. It was a match that had everything and Matthew was rightly revelling in his second title.

For Mark Bawden, Matthew's sports psychologist at the EIS, the Manchester event marked the first time he had seen his client play live. Previously, they had worked on a "reactionary" basis. Matthew would attend sessions to fix issues or solve problems after tournaments.

After Matthew's two-hour win over Willstrop, Bawden asked Matthew to visit him over the next few days in Sheffield. The jubilant Yorkshireman duly attended, sat down and asked for Bawden's thoughts.

"I thought psychologically it wasn't great," Bawden told him. Matthew was taken aback. Why? "Emotionally you were so up and down. That is not the mindset

that will enable you to perform. It is too extreme."

So began a series of sessions to channel Matthew's "warrior and assassin" sides. Bawden's line of thinking was that Matthew had a strength which could make him the world's best. "It's all there but a bit out of control," he told Matthew.

"Nick was naturally excited by this and soon enough he was working on that area: when to control and develop the mindset, and when to dictate the mode. He had to turn on the 'warrior' when he needed to and not let the opponent or environment dictate. It was his best friend and his own worst enemy."

Bawden's initial contact with Matthew came when he was ranked fifth in the world, but he felt the Yorkshireman could progress. Reactive meetings became proactive. "That fitted my model of working, building rather than fixing problems," says Bawden.

"The first thing I did was to profile Nick's game. He was very good at everything, but not the world's best at anything in any area. To get to be the best,

he has to have that edge that other people fear when they step on the court."

Bawden focused on the positive psychology – the super strengths, the volleying, the fitness and the mental side. Sessions multiplied and the pair met pre and post-competition. "With Nick you have an incredibly disciplined athlete, where no stone is left unturned. He recognised he had to shift his mindset to improve," Bawden added.

According to Bawden, who also works with the England cricket team, Matthew's best asset is his drive. More impressively, he seemingly does this on his own. There is no Matthew entourage as you will see with Andy Murray, Britain's tennis no.1. Matthew's mind is essentially a spreadsheet, where he can forward-plan when he needs to see one of his 'team' and what he needs to do to improve his game.

"Once he decides to work on something, he wants to nail it," concludes Bawden. "From then on, he was driving the car and our relationship was forged. I wish every athlete was like this. It would make my life very easy."

THE TRAINER

MARK CAMPBELL

Brutally harsh is how best to sum up Matthew's tweets after a session with affable Kiwi Mark Campbell. "It's only the good ones he tweets about," says Campbell, the lead strength and conditioning coach at the EIS.

Matthew is referring to rumble circuits, a continuous block of exercises – including bench dips, body-weight squats, side planks, leg lowers, a row and a cycle – lasting up to an hour.

The circuits form a fair chunk of Matthew's regime in the off season. It is a time when Matthew will see the Sheffield-based Campbell perhaps three times a week from May to the beginning of September.

However, it is an assignment given to Matthew while he coaches during the

summer at Williams College in the USA that Campbell believes has been most beneficial.

"I give him two to three sessions a day, just little blocks of work," says Campbell. "He always comes back in really good shape. He enjoys the training and physical side, and even though I'm not there, I know he will do it down to a T. It is at the heart of why he continues to produce these amazing physical performances."

As Campbell admits, Matthew is "not the strongest guy in the world". But squash doesn't demand strength, so it is his recovery from high-intensity efforts that impresses the Kiwi.

"For dedication and the all-round package I haven't seen anyone like him before," adds Campbell, who came to the UK in 2007 after stints working for rugby teams in New Zealand. "Nick was one of the first athletes that I worked with five years ago, which was a bit of a dream for me."

It was a dream for Campbell because he plays squash himself. So does this help in his job with Matthew? "I used to think that if you are challenged enough and you listen to the coaches, you can do the job just as well. But I am starting to think the opposite. Because I do play squash, I have an advantage."

After the off season and obvious pain inflicted on Matthew, the second of Campbell's roles is to plan the year, making sure the two-time world champion peaks physically at given tournaments. The World Open is next on the hit list.

And the future? Could Matthew compete in other challenges outside squash, say triathlon? Campbell thinks for a moment before replying: "I hadn't thought of it. He's a great rider and runner (Hedley, Matthew's father, was a PE teacher). I don't know what kind of swimmer he is – he might sink! I am sure he will find something physically challenging to do."

THE MAKING OF MATTHEW

Those who have followed Matthew's career will tell you that his career only started to blossom once he had ironed out his technical deficiencies during his mid 20s. However, Squash Player can reveal it was a change of heart from his coach during the 2003 World Team Championship that saw the Yorkshireman become the force he is today.

At the start of Matthew's career on the PSA World Tour, Pearson says, there were a few years where "arrogance crept through".

"He would have a big result and then

lose in the first round of the next tournament," the coach recalled. "I would always get on to him about being humble, not being seen as God's gift and get his mind ready for the next tournament."

The turnaround came in Vienna nine years ago and a tie against Canada in the last eight. Willstrop was struggling with tiredness and Pearson told Matthew that he would be playing the following day in the quarter-finals.

But something jolted Pearson which he couldn't shake off. Had he made the right decision? No. A sprightly Matthew was on court warming up for his match the next day and Pearson took him aside.

Coach told player that he couldn't trust him. He was too erratic. And with England due to play on a side court, a volatile atmosphere was expected.

Willstrop won his rubber against Shahier Razik 3/1, but it was a match too far. Matthew was subsequently thrust into the semi-finals against France – who went on to beat England – and he destroyed Jean-Michel Arcucci 9-1, 9-3, 9-2.

"Because our relationship was so strong," Pearson says, "I knew there wasn't going to be a fall-out (from not picking him). That match definitely made him, though, and since then he has been like a Trojan."

