



# The Golan Heights

Richard Eaton reports on the extraordinary journey Spanish star Borja Golan has travelled to return to squash's elite

There once was a mysterious stranger who arrived in England from a distant and little-known land. Alone and uncertain, he endured self-imposed exile, speaking little of the language and battling with fierce inner demons.

Just when his long and testing trial was forging him into the man he wished to become, he was suddenly and catastrophically hurt, and forced to retreat to his faraway lair.

Months of doubt and despair followed, but were met with discipline and recovery. After that, he became better, braver and more ambitious than before.

This is the story of Borja Golan. Widely known as the finest squash player to have hailed from Spain, he is far less understood as one of the rarest, most unusual and most odds-defying pioneers the sport has seen.

Golan has had to cope with struggles which few people outside Galicia, from where he comes, could ever imagine. It's an autonomous region just to the north of Portugal, described as having mists, mystical religion and a rugged Atlantic coastline. It certainly has a surprising Celtic heritage with its own language.

Resources were not always plentiful here and squash was little-known when

Golan began. But he was a driven maverick and a restless searcher. Without those qualities he could never have made it.

Before marvelling at his unusual past, let's celebrate Golan's even more unusual present. It has been profoundly affected by a long and painful recovery from a traumatic knee injury, and then by the joyous rediscovery of his potential. That was shown during an amazing five-game match with Ramy Ashour at the British Open, one of the best all week at the revived tournament.

The quality of Golan's play, with a spikier, more incisive streak, suggested he could return to the world's top 10 and might even be able to push towards the leading five.

There was a creative intent which surprised those who thought of him as a quiet journeyman with a fine engine, but with an artisan emphasis on containment

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I don't have many resources

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and movement. Instead of playing in straight lines against the Egyptian strokemaker, Golan used the boast and mixed the short and the long games unexpectedly.

True, he has been a very physical player. Indeed, it was outstanding athleticism which first convinced observers that the young Golan could make it. However, one or two who witnessed his fraught reactions to early difficulties realised these might signal other remarkable qualities too.

Painful failures brought self-vilification and violent racket-smashing. These forceful negatives may well have been inevitable opposites to a positive emotional powerhouse. Without these

paradoxes he might never have made the improbable journey from a squash backwater to the sport's elite.

A window into this psyche emerges when Golan talks about his parents' home at Milladoiro, a small town near the city of Santiago de Compostela, where he learned to speak Galician as well as Spanish. Golan's words reveal not only a special identity, but also one which is more passionate than some Englishmen can ever imagine.

"Like my country, I'm simple and don't have many resources compared with England, Egypt, France or Malaysia," Golan says.

"In the past we used to be an emigrant region because we were a very poor area, and now if you go to South America or Germany or Switzerland, you can find many Galicians. For that there is a saying: there are Galicians up on the moon!

"Galicians find a way to survive and to improve - and this is what I try to do. We are a disciplined people with a reputation as hard workers and loyal people. I try to live these qualities."

Golan's journey to England came courtesy of John Milton, the squash coach and consultant.

The Spaniard first met him at an under-15 training camp at Wycliffe in Gloucestershire, while he was visiting a compatriot who attended the college. They met again at the Spanish Junior Open in Madrid, where Golan asked Milton to coach him after becoming enraged by a loss to one of the Englishman's proteges.

"When I saw him coming towards me, I thought he was coming to complain," Milton jokes. It was one of Golan's best decisions. Milton has run his Squash Prospects group for almost two decades now, but even then, back in the 1990s, it was evident how successful it was becoming.

Golan joined Milton at Broxbourne, first of all during school holidays, then permanently. He initially planned to stay for a year, but extended it to 15 months. It had been a culture shock, but he gradually prospered.

"He was very, very respectful off court," Milton remembers. "He was well-mannered. He didn't talk a lot, because he wasn't confident about his English (at that time).

"But when he got on court, he would always get annoyed with himself when he made mistakes. He under-estimated himself. He wouldn't give himself the credit he deserved."

A similar point was made, face to face, by Mark Chaloner, the decade older squad mate who had been one of England's World Team Championship-winning heroes in 1995.

A practice game deteriorated into shrieks of self-criticism from Golan and Chaloner suggested he showed himself more respect, warning that these

## How to rehab like Golan

**T**wo weeks after surgery on the knee it was important to create more bend in the joint and more extension in the leg, all with the help of a physio. This was the hardest period, but it improved when work in the swimming pool began.

One month was spent on non-impact walking and running movements in the pool, and doing strengthening exercises.

It was two months before crutches were discarded, but after two and a half months it was possible to work the legs on a machine, strengthening quadriceps and hamstrings.

After three months weights were introduced to build up the body, combined with time on an exercise bike and long walks.

After four months came the first running, very slowly to begin with, but increasing the speed and intensity each week.

After five months came the first court work, with solo practices and ghosting, though in a very controlled way. The length and intensity of this was increased gradually.

After six months came the first hard routines and the first training matches. At this time it was necessary to work on balance, with plenty of stability exercises and use of bosu gym equipment.

After seven and a half months came



the first tournament - a wonderful feeling.

It is now important to work even more on becoming mentally and physically stronger, to extend a competitive career as long as possible.

emotions risked self-destruction.

"But he has always been instinctively likeable off court and has allowed that nature to come through as he matured on court," Milton points out.

Those days the Prospects contained

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Squash is not a job,  
it's a passion

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not only Golan and Chaloner, but Rodney Durbach from South Africa, and Ali Walker and Alex Stait. "It was a good group, really good," Golan says. "John was a good coach and a good friend." Within two years the Spaniard had climbed from 243

in the world to the top 40.

Long since it had become clear to Milton that he was dealing with a young man with an unusually powerful psychology, not only because of Golan's startling inner fire, but his extraordinary single-mindedness.

"He did an awful lot of training by himself," Milton says. "He has enormous mental strength, determination and discipline. These are the strongest I have ever seen in a player I have worked with."

So how and why did a driven mentality like this connect itself with squash?

The answer lay in the small Galician community of Milladoiro. It had only 5,000 people, but the Golan family lived just 200 metres from a sports club. Its options included not only football, the great attraction, but a swimming pool and a couple of squash courts.

Golan tried them all. He was good at football and that might have become his



Borja Golan talks to coach John Milton at the recent British Open

preference, especially as his father was a semi-professional player in the Spanish Second Division. But when at the age of 14 Borja had to choose, he miraculously opted for squash.

"I was winning more at squash and that was what tipped the balance," he explained. "At football I often had to travel away from home, 40 or 50 kilometres, so I became interested in squash more and more."

What also attracted him, besides the convenience of squash, was that it is an individual sport. "All that demanding time spent training rewards you most of the time," he said.

"In football you can train really hard and what happens still depends on other people. If other guys aren't training as hard as you, you won't do well. I liked it a lot that there were a group of friends, really good friends.

"But I had the good fortune to be able to make a living at squash. And it's not really a job, it's a passion. I love it, which is also good luck. I don't think I am really talented even now."

Golan became unsure in other ways. For a while he felt the lifestyle of a professional squash player might not be for him. During that time he moved to Barcelona to do a university degree in journalism. But it meant combining two things, study and squash, something which did not really suit Golan's nature.

"That's a difficult task for anyone. But

Borja is so single-minded that he can only do one thing to the nth degree," Milton laughed. So with one year of the course still to go, Golan put it on hold.

Another barrier presented itself when he reached the edge of the world's top 20. He was there for a long time without being able to break into it. "I thought the problem was a little bit in my mind and that I was having difficulty in winning last few points," he says.

To rectify it he employed Juan Cho Aramental, a psychologist with Spanish Second Division football club Santa Lancha. "I had 15 or 20 sessions with him and found it interesting," Golan said. "It helped me remove the pressure from myself in important parts of a match.

"Sometimes it's little details which help raise your level - developing your mental strength a bit or improving your confidence. And in the next few months I won 95 percent of my matches, which put me in the top 10 for the first time."

Milton also made a contribution to this breakthrough, identifying flaws in Golan's schedule. "He was not giving himself enough rest before moving on to the next tournament in a different country," Milton said.

"And it was as if he was trying to protect his ranking rather than take a risk, which is something you have to do as you move upwards."

The biggest breakthrough arrived at the French International Championships in

2005, when Golan beat first Thierry Lincou, the former world no.1, and then James Willstrop, then ranked three in the world, to reach the final in Paris.

Though he lost to that other great French star, Greg Gaultier, in four games, the sequence of performances gave Golan confidence. His level rose further. He felt able to attack more. That summer he worked even harder to develop his game, not only to get more balls back, but also to inject speed into his attacks.

It all looked so promising. But the following year came disaster in the Columbian Open final against David Palmer. Golan had already played more than two hours against home hero Miguel Angel Rodriguez, finishing at nine the previous evening. At noon he was on court again, for another hour and 50 minutes, against the former world champion from Australia.

Somehow Golan reached match-ball in the fifth. But as Palmer played a drop and Golan changed direction, his muscles could no longer cope. His knee twisted, a cruciate ligament snapped and suddenly his career was plunged into crisis.

"I had two matches that were not normal and more than four hours on court

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I don't think I'm really talented

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in less than 15 hours," Golan said.

It was eight months before he played again. His ranking plummeted from 10 to 106 and he feared it might all be over. Recalling those moments more than three years later, he still sounded traumatised.

But the past is now really passed. In the future can Golan do even better?

It took two years to train his mind away from instincts which told him to protect the injury and instead to embark on the risks of a more attacking game. He does that better now.

This ability helped him to a two-game lead against Ashour and then to 8-6 in the third, at which point the thought entered his head: "I can win." Moments later he was 8-10 down. The deflection in his concentration cost him dear. He still feels annoyed when he thinks of it.

But Golan has matured. He will be 30 at the start of next year. "I have a few years to reach my peak," he claims. "It's a question of confidence and of getting a good win. Then your level increases. I can still do better."

Perhaps one day Golan will finish the final year of his degree. He also has ideas about setting up his own squash academy. Before that, though, there is another lunar orbit to make.