



RE-BORN



Nour El Tayeb tells Richard Eaton about her new perspective on squash and Tour life as a mother

Nour el Tayeb's remarkable return to the sport, baby in tow, has been played out in front of the eyes of an adoring squash public.

Her daughter Farida Ali Farag, now approaching her first birthday, has accompanied her to every tournament since her comeback to the PSA Tour at last December's Black Ball Open.

Little Farida doesn't know it yet, but in her short life so far she has witnessed her mother's incredibly swift and impressive re-entry into the top echelons of world squash within just six months of childbirth,

not to mention her dad, Ali Farag, winning the World Championship and reclaiming his mantle as world no.1.

El Tayeb has not allowed motherhood to dim her long-held ambition of matching her husband's world no.1 status.

No mother in squash, not even Natalie Grinham who won a silver category tournament less than a year after giving birth, has ever reached the sport's pinnacle, but there is inspiration in the tennis world from ex-Wimbledon champions Margaret Court, Evonne Goolagong and Kim Clijsters, who all won major titles after having children.

For now, El Tayeb can be justifiably delighted with the arc of her progress – reaching the World Championship semi-finals in Cairo and the semis again at the El Gouna International in June. Losing to Nour El Sherbini and Nouran Gohar respectively in those matches (taking a game on each occasion) is most certainly nothing to be upset about.

Yet before the maelstrom of motherhood, El Tayeb had been upset – more often than she was comfortable with.

She was experiencing existential angst and a desperation to succeed that became all-consuming and self-destructive. She wanted to give up squash altogether.

And so, startlingly, she actually did. She was ranked three in the world, was part of



the first husband and wife relationship in sporting history to win major individual titles on the same day (at the 2017 US Open) and she was often still at the height of her powers – yet she decided to relinquish it all.

Or she thought she had. What she hadn't reckoned with was the transformational force of new life. It was the birth of her daughter that has created a re-birth of her ambition.

Nour had her explanation. "Having a baby has taken away a lot of the stress for me," she said. "Before, it felt like I came away from every tournament feeling upset. Even if I made a final or had a good result, I still felt bad about it."

Nour was even quoted as saying, "thank God I got pregnant" – because it had given her the perfect excuse no longer to suffer the pressures she continually experienced.

She began to hope that a baby might reduce the self-punishment and change her perspective. Thus far this appears to be happening. "Having Farida is something you can look forward to every day," she says. "It has taken a lot of stress from me.

"Travelling with her is nice, and having her around helps me not to over-think my matches as I used to. I love the idea of travelling with Farida and Ali together. I am lucky and thankful that this has happened."

Farag says he is often keen to hurry away after tournaments so he can help look after his daughter. "This is the nicest message to convey," El Tayeb said, "that a man is encouraging his wife to pursue her career."

She added: "I get a lot of support, first from my family, then from players on the tour, and it really helps. All the girls on tour have been very nice to me. And they help out with Farida when I have a match." Others apparently encourage her to keep working hard. "That does help keep me going, because on so many days I don't want to train," she admits. "I can be feeling it's too hard, that I'm not going to get to world no.1 - which I really want," she is reported as saying.

Another insight into her progress can be seen in the unnoticed moments on the practice court. The first time she took Farida with her to practice she put her

stuff in the baby's bag "along with the diapers," she smiles. "But now Farida needs food and things I have two bags. And her bag is as important as mine. I pack hers - diapers, food, extra and clothes."

Does Farida like being by the court?
"She likes to eat squash balls!" El Tayeb chuckles. "I don't think she's aware of everything. I think she likes the red lines; she is always trying to touch them. She's familiar with the fitness coach and the squash court and she likes people."

The new perspective that having a child gives all new mothers is permeating positively into El Tayeb's career. The self-criticism and anguish seem to be easing.

She recognises it well: "I feel like I am putting a bit less pressure on myself because my life doesn't just revolve around me any more."

RETURN TO DUNLOP

Nour el Tayeb's fabulous comeback on the PSA World Tour, which carried her to a World Open semi-final, suggests that her return to Dunlop is working well for both parties.

Dunlop Squash Category Manager Stephen Heatley said: "It's amazing to have Nour back on the Tour and back with the Dunlop family. Nour and her husband Ali were famously joint US Open champions in 2017. As Nour re-establishes herself amongst the top group, such success is again a possibility."

Nour believes her new racket, the 125 Black Revolution Pro, has helped make her comeback even smoother.

"I feel very comfortable with this racket," she says. "It's both lighter and thinner. I get more control. I also feel from a display point of view that it is attractive. I love an all-black."