

KIWIS SET TO CONQUER?

Mike Dale runs his eye over the contenders for the Commonwealth Games singles titles

The silver fern looks set to dominate the squash medals table at this summer's Commonwealth Games in Birmingham with Paul Coll an overwhelming favourite in the men's singles and Joelle King topping the women's seedings.

To call a Coll victory inevitable would be a little insulting to his rivals, but the statistics are stark: Coll has not lost to any player from a Commonwealth country in a best-of-five match on the PSA Tour since 2017 (when James Willstrop beat him in the Tournament of Champions quarter-finals).

The world no.1's strongest challenge is likely to come from Wales' Joel Makin, who can certainly match Coll's infamous stamina and defensive game, but has yet to develop the front-court dynamism that Coll has added to his armoury since linking up with coach Rob Owen (who Makin split with a couple of years ago).



Joelle King favourite to retain the women's gold medal

Coll has a 9-2 record against Makin on Tour, with his only two defeats coming in a best-of-three group-stage match at the PSA World Tour Finals in 2019 and way back at the 2016 Australian Open.

England's up-and-coming Patrick Rooney and India's elegant veteran Saurav Ghosal are the jokers in the pack with Malaysia's former world junior champion Eain Yow Ng making great recent strides under the tutelage of Hadrian Stiff.

By his own admission, defending champion Willstrop is just glad to be there. Although his retirement plans remain fluid (see page 16-17), this will certainly be his last Games and he will adore competing in the festival of sport in his home nation.

The women's draw is a little more unpredictable, with England's Sarah Jane Perry having hometown advantage in her

bid to overcome close rival King.

The Kiwi, however, has a 10-3 PSA Tour head-to-head record against Perry including straight-games victories in their last three encounters. World no.5 King, who lives and trains just down the road in Bristol, is hungry for a fourth Commonwealth gold.

England's strongest bid may even come from elsewhere. Georgina Kennedy has, intriguingly, beaten King, Perry and India's Joshna Chinappa since bursting onto the scene after graduating from Harvard.

The only leading player in the Commonwealth Games field she hasn't beaten yet is Wales' Tesni Evans, who will harbour podium hopes alongside compatriot Emily Whitlock, Malaysia's Sivasangari Subramaniam, Hollie Naughton of Canada and Scotland's Lisa Aitken.

DOUBLE STANDARDS

Mike Dale looks back at April's WSF World Doubles Championships to assess the form in the build-up to Birmingham

Making sense of a format as crazily random as squash doubles is a head-scrumbling task but the recent WSF World Doubles in Glasgow may offer some clues as to which pairings to put your money on in Birmingham.

Nations used April's championships as a tune-up and spying mission on opponents ahead of the Commonwealth Games. Neither Egypt or USA entered and Spain were the only non-Commonwealth nation to participate.

India were the big winners with victories in the mixed and women's events while England long-established pairing of James Willstrop and Declan James triumphed in the men's.

Dipika Pallikal Khartik featured in both India's winning teams to mark an astonishing return to the squash scene. She hadn't played on Tour since 2018 and gave birth to twins with husband Dinesh Khartik, the Indian cricketer, just last October.

Pallikal Khartik, 30, teamed up with Saurav Ghosal to beat England's veteran

duo Adrian Waller and Alison Waters in straight games in the mixed final. Scotland's Greg Lobban and Lisa Aitken beat Wales' Joel Makin and Tesni Evans in the third/fourth play-off.

Barely an hour passed before Pallikal Khartik was back on court for the women's final alongside Joshna Chinappa where they beat England's Waters and Sarah Jane Perry in a three-setter.

Willstrop and James, bronze medallists on the Gold Coast in 2018, overcame Greg Lobban and Rory Stewart after a very tight first game. Despite their defeat, hosts Scotland emerged with huge credit as Alan Clyne and Douglas Kempself also won the men's third/fourth play-off.

It was a disappointing week for New Zealand with Paul Coll and Joelle King finishing eighth in the mixed and King and Amanda Landers-Murphy – the Gold Coast gold medallists – coming fourth in the women's.

As for England, their mixed pairings for Birmingham offer intriguing contrasts at



Dipika Pallikal Khartik was India's comeback queen in Glasgow

opposite ends of the age demographic, with 32-year-old Waller and the recently-retired Waters and youngsters Patrick Rooney and Georgina Kennedy in the mixed, while Waller teams up with Daryl Selby in the men's for what will be the Essex star's final event before retirement.

GETTING SQUASH BACK ON TRACK

Appetites were whetted for the Commonwealth Games by a stunning week at Birmingham New Street as over 2,000 people played on the glass show court in the train station's spectacular atrium.

Over one million people came past the court during the week-long programme of events and those lucky enough to play on it included school children, club players and members of the armed forces, plus pros, legendary ex-pros and up-and-coming stars playing exhibition matches.

The court also hosted the semi-finals and finals of the University of Birmingham Open, with the men's and women's winners – Egypt's Ibrahim Elkabbani and Japan's Satomi Watanabe respectively – earning places in the World Championships in Cairo as a result.

Mostly though the week of activity in early April was about showcasing squash to new audiences – indeed, 95% of people who went on the court had never played before.

The Eventis glass court was sited in prime position right in front of the train departure



boards in the station's vast atrium. Alongside it was a smaller three-sided court designed by Melior Sports which also attracted passers-by for a quick hit.

The festival of squash was organised by Squash United, an official project of United by Birmingham, the Commonwealth Games community programme. The collective of enthusiasts includes the PSA Foundation, Rackets Cubed, the WSF and England Squash.

Delivering countless coaching sessions throughout the week was the indefatigable 'Mr Squash', Mike Harris, supported by the organisational gusto of PSA Foundation manager Adriana Olaya, Ming Lee and Rackets Cubed founder Michael Hill.

Hill said: "It's been amazing to see so many people of all ages and backgrounds trying their hand at squash at this unique event. The smiles on people's faces said it all!"

Olaya added: "Having this court in such a public space was incredible. Every single person that walked through the station this week talked about squash, even if they were just wondering what it was. It made squash stand out. It really truly was a celebration of our beloved sport and our squash community!"

GUYANA'S GUIDING LIGHT

Carl Ince's wisdom will embolden the Caribbean island's squash squad as they head to Birmingham



Guyana's tilt at Commonwealth Games squash success will be watched intently by legendary 78-year-old national coach Carl Ince from his farm in the tropical rainforest.

Ince's squash obsession began aged 30 in Manchester. After he returned home to the Caribbean, he built two concrete courts at his farm alongside his fruit trees and black

water creek. He recently added a third court with a glass back wall which hosts national team training camps.

Philadelphia-based coach Ramon Chan-A-Sue will accompany the Guyanese players to Birmingham this summer as Ince is "not too fond of travelling these days," but his influence on every member of the squad will remain profound.

"Coach has been part of my life for 21 years," said Mary Fung-A-Fat. "He created such a strong foundation for me as a player that has led me to so many successes. Coach has a way of making you feel heard and his sincerity, wisdom and gentle nature has left a lasting impression on me.

"The last Games [on the Gold Coast] was my first Commonwealth experience, and what excited me the most was simply the buzz of the village, sharing space and experiences with some of the world's best athletes and meeting some of my squash idols. I'm looking forward to just being part of it all again."

Ince's grandson Shomari Wiltshire, 18, recently won Guyana's national title. He said: "Coach Carl has had a great impact on me as I have been his student since I was six. In Birmingham, I can't wait to see how I adapt against top players from the PSA Tour."



The two other members of Guyana's team for the Games are brother and sister Ashley and Jason-Ray Khalil (pictured). Both played international badminton before dedicating their energies to squash. The island's most famous player, Nicolette Fernandes (now 38), had to pull out of the qualifying play-off competition.

Guyana are reigning Caribbean champions and the island hosts the Caribbean Area Squash Championships for juniors in July. Ince, a Level 4 coach, plans to relinquish his coaching duties soon and be a coach tutor, including to his grandsons Dan and Samuel who are both Level 2 coaches.