

# Matthew's Treble

Ian McKenzie reports on a superb third world title for Nick Matthew in Manchester

Everything seemed in place for a third world title for Ramy Ashour, unbeaten for over a year and a rare talent.

The Egyptian warmed up against Laurens Jan Anjema, which was no easy task. The Dutchman took the first game and challenged mightily for the second before Ashour reached round two in 65 minutes.

The world no.1 then steamed past Egyptian qualifier Fares Mohamed Dessouki in three, but again dropped the first game against Australian Cameron Pilley, the 14th seed, before booking his quarter-final place against the first Indian to reach the last eight, Saurav Ghosal.

The unseeded Ghosal had taken out no.15 seed Alister Walker, of Botswana, 3/1 in round two followed by Finland's Henrik Mustonen, who had qualified for the last 16 when seventh seed Peter Barker retired injured. However, Ghosal had to battle back from 2/0 down against the tenacious Finn before earning his place in the quarters.

Meanwhile, Amr Shabana, Egypt's four-time world champion and the no.8 seed, clinched his spot in the last eight by beating acrobatic Colombian Miguel Angel Rodriguez in straight games.

Nick Matthew, the fourth seed, conceded a game in the third round against tough Egyptian Omar Mosaad,

while English rival James Willstrop defeated Spain's Borja Golan in three to face sixth seed Mohamed Elshorbagy, which would not have pleased the third seed. The Egyptian had earlier been delayed for 74 minutes, one of the longest matches of the tournament, by England's Adrian Waller in the first round.

In the bottom quarter England's Daryl Selby knocked out fifth-seeded Egyptian Karim Darwish 3/2 in the third round to come up against no.2 seed Gregory Gaultier, who had strolled through his three previous matches 3/0.

So the quarter-final line-up was Ashour v Ghosal, Shabana v Matthew, Willstrop v Elshorbagy and Selby v Gaultier.

Ashour cruised past a spirited Ghosal in three, while Shabana tried the same slow game against Matthew that had proved successful against Rodriguez. He floated the ball down the walls, slowed the game and picked his shots, but this time it didn't work.

Shabana had been sidelined for eight months with Hepatitis A and the World Championship was his first tournament back, so he was really short of competitive matches.

"When you have something taken away, you appreciate it more," he said of not being able to play. "You regret the

times you have been on court and you haven't given your all. I'm trying to rectify that now."

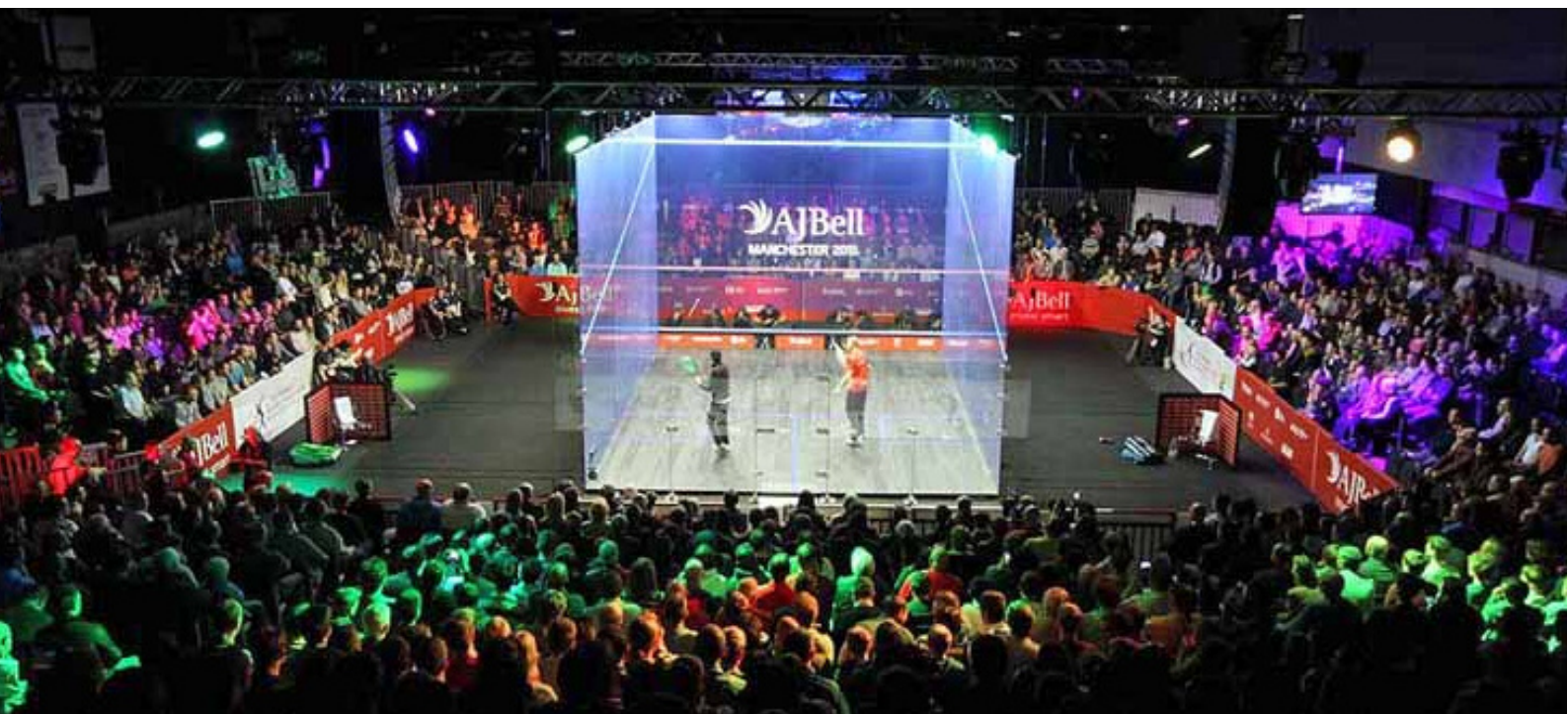
His tactics restricted Matthew but did not knock the fourth seed off his game. Matthew is not so impulsive nor prone to frustration, so it was the Englishman who qualified to face Ashour by virtue of a 3/0 win.

A rampant Ashour showcased his attacking magic in the first game of the semi-final but lapsed into indifference in the second as Matthew took control. Then Ashour held out his hand at 2-0 in the third. It was a shock. One minute he was the brilliant magician of the court waiting to be crowned, the next it was all over. This needed an urgent rethink. The press tried frantically to find out what was wrong with Ashour – hamstrings again it transpired.

Matthew was flat, not tired, but he would have wished to have had just a little bit more squash before the final, so went off to practise by himself.

In contrast, Gaultier was spending too much time on court. He defeated Selby 3/0 in an hour on the Friday while Matthew had a rest day. Then on the Saturday he faced Elshorbagy, who had overcome Willstrop 3/1 in a gripping battle that came down to just a few points.

Willstrop had controlled the pace of





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the game, varying floated drives with hard drives punched under the Egyptian's volleying radar. He lobbed brilliantly to set up the rallies but made crucial mistakes and that gave the semi-final place to the Egyptian.

Elshorbagy was then involved in a tough, 78-minute semi-final against Gaultier and would have been annoyed not to have made more of winning the first game and being 8-4 up in the fourth, especially as the Frenchman had been up most of the previous night attempting to provide a drug test sample. This no doubt partly explained the subdued opening to a match that only sparked in patches as Gaultier triumphed 6-11, 11-3, 8-11, 12-10 to a standing ovation.

## THE FINAL

The Championship decider will go down as a squash classic because of all the human and sporting drama behind the on-court struggle. It was Matthew's third final and he already had two world titles. For Gaultier, it was his fourth and he famously had not yet won one.

Gaultier's mental performance had been seen as his Achilles heel and he was critical of his past performances. On the eve of the event he had said: "I am more mature now. I know how to deal with the environment. I've been stupid all my life about this and that was my main mistake – being easily distracted and frustrated when I am playing. Now I focus on my game and that's all I need to do."

Well almost. Gaultier refused to be distracted and even congratulated his opponent on a few shots. He led 9-6 in the first game and 8-6 in the second but lost them both 11-9, the first to a brilliant surge of attacking volleys from his opponent when he was too passive and the second when he made four mistakes in a hand. Can we get inside Gaultier's head to find out what happened or was it just happenstance?

Perhaps in the third Gaultier's motivation, unsurprisingly, wavered marginally, but he pulled himself together in a point-for-point struggle to edge ahead and earn a game ball at 10-7. Yet again, though, he allowed Matthew to level and seize a match ball by pressurising him into a mistake. Gaultier stared out through the wall. Were the memories of previous finals haunting him now even as he was trying to save this one?

Gaultier then dived onto the floor and while lying there, clubbed the ball up, remarkably got to his feet and won a let as Matthew poured on the pressure. He had survived! Galvanised, he played a brilliant, forehand volley drop to level and pressurised Matthew into conceding the game 13-11 and so keeping the match – and his dream – alive.

Refocused, Gaultier surged into an 8-2 lead in the fourth but then again

struggled to finish it as his speed diminished and he seemed distracted. This advantage could not be frittered away, though, and he won the game 11-7 to level the match at 2/2.

"The fourth was pure doubt. I backed off," said Matthew later. "I had to get up for the fifth to stand toe to toe with him."

That he did. As Gaultier's powers waned, Matthew pushed on. "Mentally in a match you have to go through the pain barrier," he said – and he did. His outstretched racket just reached a powerful crosscourt from the Frenchman to win the first point and grab an

important early lead. Gaultier slowed. He was distracted by the cramping pain in his quads. He tried to fight back, but this time he couldn't and now it was all Matthew. The Englishman romped home 11-2 in the decider.

Matthew fell back on the floor and looked to the heavens as he celebrated his third world title, while the Frenchman hobbled off and pitched his racket towards his chair in disappointment.

In the end Matthew had pushed through mentally and physically. "That's what he does," said his fitness trainer, Mark Campbell.



Nick Matthew (left) dominates the front court in the final against Greg Gaultier