

Ramy's exorcism

In a wide-ranging interview, Egyptian genius Ramy Ashour talks to Alan Thatcher about his return to form, his challengers and his volatile home country

Ramy Ashour wants the squash world to know he has conquered his demons and is ready to put his stop-start career into overdrive once again.

The upheaval caused by the Egyptian uprising has mirrored the turmoil in Ashour's squash life. Now he's planning a revolution of his own, with the aim of overthrowing those currently in power above him to return to the top of the PSA rankings.

Ashour, now 25, is one of the most popular players ever to pick up a squash racket. Breezing through life with a smile on his face, playing a carefree brand of squash that defied coaching conventions, he won the World Open at the age of 21 in 2008.

Slicing, chopping, flicking and floating the ball, he mesmerised his opponents and a growing army of adoring followers with his mind-blowing flashes of genius.

A career landscape appeared to be unfolding, with Ashour dominating the men's game for years to come. He was all set to be the new Jahangir, the 'King of The Court', conqueror of every territory.

It hasn't quite turned out that way, though. Fitness problems and a succession of injuries seemed to have diluted his energy. He seemed to be suffering from lapses in concentration and too often we saw a confused frown replacing the smile.

His behaviour during the British Open in May was extraordinary. He was clearly

distracted during his quarter-final against fellow Egyptian Amr Shabana.

Ashour sat outside the court between games and threw every racket out of his bag as he searched for one with a grip to his liking.

It was painful to watch and Ashour admitted that he went to pieces if his racket grip felt anything less than perfect.

He said: "I keep changing rackets because the grip is very important to me. If the grip is not right, it stops me playing the way I want to. I need the grip to be just right. I don't have a very good record with the racket companies."

Ashour had surrendered a two-game lead as Shabana hit back to take it to five. The knock-up had lasted longer than the fourth game, which Ashour lost 11-1.

Astonishingly, Ashour recovered his composure to win the fifth 11-4 to set up a semi-final with James Willstrop and

final was sublime as he and Willstrop battled shot for shot. This was the Ashour that everyone loved to see, diving all over the court and parading his genius in flamboyant style. Willstrop gave everything, but it was the Egyptian who powered past the top seed to face Nick Matthew in the final.

Once again, though, the demons took over and the winners that had flowed from his racket against Willstrop were replaced by mistakes, an astonishing average of six tins per game, as Matthew powered past him in straight games to collect his third British Open title.

At the end of the match Ashour went walkabout and was late for the presentation ceremony.

Earlier in the week, he had scraped past Spaniard Borja Golan and admitted he was "mentally all over the place".

After beating Shabana, he added: "There are a lot of crazy things going on in my head. I am not quite sane. Maybe I am too emotional."

Ashour, like Shabana, has yet to have his name engraved on the British Open trophy, but he ended a similar hoodoo by claiming his first U.S. Open title in October.

Hopefully, this will provide the springboard for Ashour to return to his imperious best.

Having beaten Matthew in the semi-finals and Gregory Gaultier in the final, he claimed he had overcome his emotional

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deny Shabana maybe his last chance of a British Open title.

Ashour's performance in the semi-

turmoil. I asked him if he had sought any help and he responded: "I just asked the demons kindly to go away. They listened. The mind is a powerful thing and it's amazing how many things can be achieved when you put your head down and fully concentrate on something."

It was a typically enigmatic answer from an enigmatic performer.

He was delighted with his performances throughout the U.S. Open, overcoming a variety of challenges posed by Saurav Ghosal, Tarek Momen and Peter Barker before meeting Matthew.

He said: "The level at which squash professionals compete is getting harder every day, with players bringing to the court their own unique identity and game technique. This high quality of game is good for the competition itself and the audience."

Featuring in videos and posters to promote the event, Ashour was impressed by the standards set by the U.S. Open at Drexel University.

He added: "This year it was very well marketed and in my opinion there should be an annual award for the best tournament of the year – as voted by the players.

"This way, tournaments that really stand out, like this one, will be recognised for their amazing effort. I was really impressed with everything from the early preparations to the organisation of the event itself.

"For me, it's really good to win such a big tournament and taking the cup for Egypt. I am looking forward to coming back next year, especially as I have heard it's getting bigger, which will be really good."

The turbulent nature of the PSA World Tour meant that Ashour did not remain in America to play in the NetSuite Open in San Francisco, in which Gaultier beat Matthew in the final.

He explained: "Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of playing too many tournaments in the same year and have had to become more selective in participation. Specific to this tournament, I was scheduled to play in Kuwait just days before, but that got cancelled at the last minute.

"With Greg winning, it sure is great for the game to see important trophies being

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More is yet to come

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shared around. We are judged on our performance and being recognised for doing well is what it is all about."

I wondered if Ashour was seeing a more disciplined approach from Gaultier.

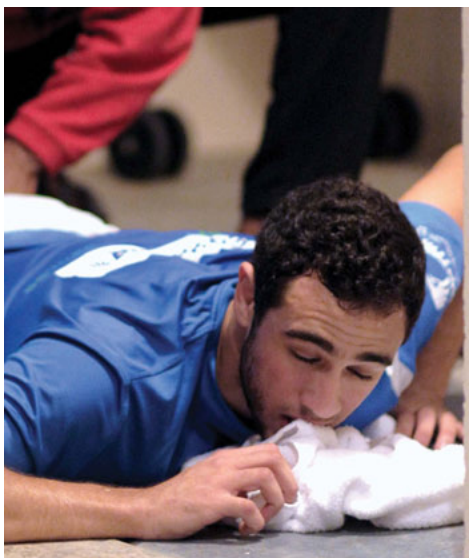
He answered: "Definitely, he is playing very well. And I am sure fatherhood is inspiring him. We are close friends, and I am really happy for Greg and that things at the moment are moving for him in the right direction."

Ashour's bright start to the season followed a period of rest and recuperation before he began to prepare for the current campaign, with his sights set firmly on the Hong Kong Open and another World Open title in Qatar in December.

He said: "I rested for a while after the British Open and then started to work and establish a good base for the tough season. I also spent some quality time with my friends and family, as I don't get to see them much during the season.

"A main highlight of the summer was travelling to London in preparation of the Squash 2020 Olympic bid presentation video with Nicol David, who is an amazing ambassador for the game. So that was exciting and something I am passionate about, and very happy to be part of.

"Looking ahead to the season, the World Open draw looks like a tough one and so in training I am just working hard and trying to learn from past mistakes. I know I



must train well if I am to do my best."

With Willstrop clearly having adapted his game to reach no.1 in the world, I wondered if Ashour might be planning a similar overhaul. His answer was more diplomatic than enlightening. These squash players clearly don't like to give too much away.

He said: "I respect James a lot and I am truly proud to have him as no.1 in the squash world. He is a great representative and ambassador for the game, and such a modest, genuine person.

"I am doing my best to get back to the top, I am enjoying my squash at the moment and am always glad and excited to challenge the world's best squash players. I am proud of my overall

achievements so far, but more is yet to come."

With so many good young Egyptians rising to the top of the rankings, it seems certain that Ashour and his compatriots will be dominating the game in the next few years.

He said: "Any Egyptian making it into the charts has made a huge effort. It is hard for Egyptians, as they get very limited support and its 90 per cent from their own perseverance and the support of their families, as well as their natural talent.

"This is one of the reasons I established the Inspire Squash Academy, as I am trying to make it easier for talented, young Egyptians to make it through with fewer hurdles.

"I just love being among these bright and genuine kids. They really do inspire me every day. I am working on programmes and events with my Inspire team and we should be hosting camps next summer (2013) for the first time and announcing that officially very soon."

Looking at challenges from different parts of the globe, Ashour added:

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I love my country

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"Challengers from all nationalities are very strong, with a new wave of players really threatening those at the top all the way.

"I am always fascinated by the stories behind the success of any player. In all honesty, I am happy when any player, male or female, regardless of their country of birth, comes up and takes over the front seat, as it's great competition and amazing for the game in general."

With Egypt still engulfed in a volatile political situation, Ashour has posted several thought-provoking comments on Twitter about life in Cairo and his frequent visits to Tahrir Square to join the protests.

I asked him how he felt the nation was coping after the revolution. He said: "I love my country and will always be proud to represent it. We are struggling at the moment and I feel for the less fortunate people, as the revolution was basically raised to help them and now they are the ones suffering the most.

"Everyone who loves the country is only hoping for a better Egypt. I just hope that the people in power now care about the disadvantaged more than their own benefits."

Let's hope Ashour's own revolution brings about the changes he so desperately seeks.