

Title chase wide open



Former world champion and no.1 Vanessa Atkinson looks forward to Nicol David's title defence in Hull, where she expects the Malaysian to face a strong English challenge

Reigning champion Nicol David will be the undisputed favourite for the 2013 Allam British Open as she bids for her fifth title, but after an impressive win over the Malaysian in Kuala Lumpur last month, Lancashire-based Laura Massaro will arguably be the most in-form player at this year's women's event in Hull.

Home hopes will rest squarely on her capable shoulders for one of the most prestigious tournaments on the WSA Tour, which boasts a rich history dating all the way back to 1922 in the women's event.

The historical significance of the event is certainly not lost on the players who return year after year in an attempt to win this most coveted of titles.

A look at the winners' table shows that past champions have tended to win the championship multiple times before begrudgingly giving way to a new challenger.

The mighty Heather McKay claimed the title on 16 consecutive occasions, fellow Australian Vicki Cardwell managed four in a row and then came the incredible run of New Zealander Susan Devoy, whose tally of eight titles was only broken by the last English woman to win the championship, Lisa Opie in 1991.

Australian Michelle Martin triumphed six years in succession, while during the last decade the titles have been shared by Australian Rachael Grinham, who has four to her name, and the imperial David, who is on four and counting.

Perhaps these mini monopolies reflect the esteem in which the title is held and the reluctance of the reigning champion to relinquish it.

David won her fourth title last year at London's O2 arena after a two-year drought during which the event did not take place. She has reigned supreme on the women's tour for the past eight years and her performance last year certainly demonstrated the steely determination with which she approaches major tournaments.

Plenty of media attention has been given to a few seemingly uncharacteristic losses over the past six months, which only goes to show the dominance we have come to expect from the Malaysian. Although certainly not insignificant, her competitors should be very cautious in attributing too much importance to these results, as her

record shows a tendency to raise her game at key moments.

Ignoring British hopes for just a moment, there are certainly a number of players more than capable of upsetting the Malaysian's bid for a fifth British Open title.

The Egyptian contingent is particularly strong, led by world no.3 Raneem El Weleily. With her ability to mix the pace and halt the flow of her opponents' movement, El Weleily has the perfect game to break the rhythm of the world no.1. The attacking nature of the Egyptian's game makes her one of the most entertaining players on the women's tour, although a propensity for unforced errors can still make her vulnerable during the early rounds.

Another notable Egyptian contender is last year's runner-up, current world no.5 Nour El Sherbini, who is improving at an alarming rate and at only 17 is showing a consistency far beyond her years.

A look down the world rankings throws up a number of other notable challengers from across the globe as well.

Although the heyday of the Grinham sisters seems to be at an end, their record at major tournaments cannot be overlooked. New Zealand's Joelle King has also been showing great form of late with

her fast-paced, clean-hitting squash, while France's Camille Serme and Malaysia's Low Wee Wern are among other hopefuls upon whom an outside bet certainly wouldn't be misplaced.

If recent form is anything to go by, though, the chances of a home winner are as good as ever.

Massaro has been in the best form of her life over the last two years, consistently making semi-finals and finals of major tournaments. By claiming last month's CIMB KL Open title, taking out David along the way, Massaro not only reached her highest ever world ranking of two, but also consolidated her position as a serious contender for this year's title. Beating David in any situation is a monumental achievement, but doing so on the Malaysian's home turf requires an extraordinary level of determination and this is something Massaro has in bucketloads.

British hopes will also be focussed on reigning national champion and world no.4 Alison Waters, whose comeback – after injury threatened to end her career – has been nothing short of remarkable. Runner-up in KL last month, Waters is in devastating form and capable of beating anyone on her day.

A mention must also go to former world no.2 Jenny Duncalf, who seems to be returning to form after a season plagued by injury.

It has to be said that David's dominance in recent years has given the men's tour the edge in terms of entertainment value, but the battle for

this year's British Open women's title is looking more open than ever and although David is certainly still the front runner, her rivals are edging ever closer. The stage is set.



Laura Massaro (left) in action against Nicol David in the 2012 World Open final.