

MATCH POINTS

In part two of a new series, Egypt's Mohamed ElShorbagy continues to talk squash with Ian McKenzie



IM: What are your key tactics? You don't seem to hit the ball to the back of the court and wait for a loose shot from your opponent – you just go on court and whack the ball!

ME: Every player I face is different; each player a different game and is different mentally. I have to study each opponent well.

IM: You study them?

ME: Yes, it is my job! If I don't, I'm not doing my job properly.

IM: Do you watch them?

ME: I watch them all the time. David [Palmer] and I watch them, and make notes. For example, I didn't have a good 2016/17 season. A new generation was coming through – my brother, Marwan, Ali Farag and Karim Abdel Gawad. They all played very well and beat me a few times. They all came with a completely different game plan to those used by Nick [Matthew] and Greg [Gaultier], two of the guys I had been used to playing for the last 10 years, and they had studied me all their lives. They had watched me way more than I had watched them. They knew how to play me and they surprised me a little bit. That's when I had to go back that summer and start working with David. They brought something different to the sport, so I had to study them, so that I could beat them.

IM: Do you watch videos to find out what your opponents are good at and what you should watch out for?

ME: Yes, I watch them again and again and again. I also see what their personality off court is like. You have to get to know them on court and off court, so that you know their breaking point. Everyone has a breaking point.

IM: So you apply pressure. How do you do that?

ME: I always make sure that if someone is going to beat me, it is going to be a marathon. Even if they succeed in beating me this time, I am sending them a message that it is going to be hard. That is the kind of mentality I put on my opponent. That is what Greg and Nick did – they broke their opponent some times. I try to make it hard for my opponents on court.

IM: We were talking about game plans and you said your game plan is specific to your opponent. If you know the player, do you remind yourself what they are like before you play them?

ME: Part of my job is to see things happening before they happen. I have to come into a season and let the other players know I have changed a few things. I have to anticipate this in them. I talk to David on things they may have improved before we have seen them. Some things we have to guess. It is part of my job to do that.

IM: What are your key tactics when you go on court?

ME: My main tactic is to just make it as hard as possible for my opponent. When it comes to tactics, it all depends on who I am playing against.

IM: Do you start with length? To me, a lot of your length seems short, because you are trying to play pressure shots, rather than put the ball in the corners.

ME: Sometimes my length is short, sometimes long.

IM: Is that calculated or is it random?

ME: No, nothing is random when I go on court. You can't win matches randomly.

Maybe I did a few times in the past, but never against players like Greg or Farag. Maybe some players have their game plan and when they go on court, they apply it, but I am not that type of player. I play differently for each match, because every player is different.

IM: So you adapt your game plan for each player?

ME: Let's take the example of the 'leftie' again. I know I have to apply pressure to their backhand, but if that doesn't work, I need a plan B and if that doesn't work, a plan C.

IM: Do you talk about this with David Palmer?

ME: Yes.

IM: He says: "You're playing a left-hander – what are you going to do? Do you keep him on the backhand?"

ME: Yes.

IM: Can you tell me about your two other fall-back plans?

ME: (laughing): It's secret! It's not just who I'm playing against; it's the way I think. If I tell you that, my opponents will know the way I think – that is what it is all about.

NEXT TIME: Mohamed talks about mental strength, improvement, fine margins and finding a way to win, as well as giving tips for the young player and the club player.

Part one of Mohamed ElShorbagy's Match Points series is in Issue SP192 and is available on SP digital.