

Rod Gilmour

TRADING SECRETS:

SQUASH GREATS RECALL
THEIR GREATEST DUELS



Foreword by
Malcolm Willstrop

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Introduction

REPORTING ON squash is an odd concept. From an outsiders' point of view, it may be played in small confines, with two players thrashing a ball against a wall and not much else to go on, but squash is so much more than that.

It is one of the most consistently draining sports I have covered as a journalist. Watching two athletes battle it out in a small glass box from close quarters, you feel part of the action. You *are* one of those players. Throw in a two-hour, five-game marathon and you can come away with your energy sapped. It is intoxicating and, more often than not at the top of the game, dramatic.

This is certainly the case at an event such as the Tournament of Champions at Grand Central Terminal in New York. The press area is situated underneath the stands behind the back wall in the art deco Vanderbilt Hall and, in between matches, you brush past players trying to warm up in the small areas consigned to the event. There's a buzz like no other, while the ToC encapsulates the sport as a whole: cover squash long enough and you bear witness to player habits, the moods, the freneticism. Squash simply sucks you in.

The stories and subplots surrounding tournaments or individual matches are endlessly fascinating too. In essence, it is all about the match-ups and rivalries, the pursuit of beating the best at the time, the fight to get into the top 16 where life as a touring professional starts to bear fruit.

So, rather than reading about these specific matches and points as a whole, and how these greats won the titles, my aim was to get a clearer picture of their thoughts and mindsets at the time and how they were able to cross the winning line (unless your name is the indefatigable and unbeatable Jahangir Khan).

Back in the heyday of squash – the late 1960s to the late 80s, when clubs were flourishing, the sport found a regular spot on BBC's *Grandstand* and reports were regular fodder for sports editors – press rooms were a lively place to be.

Unfortunately, those media coverage good times have dwindled as the sport has progressed to the thrill it is today: modern glass courts, a high-definition TV product and remarkably fit entertainers few know about (Olympian Jessica Ennis told me in 2012 that Nick Matthew, Yorkshire's three-time world champion, was Britain's most understated and fittest sportsman).

Yet, the stories are still bountiful. British journalists attending the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow will testify to that, having crossed Glasgow to Scotstoun to watch the final between James Willstrop and Matthew and made reference to the pair's career-long, lively rivalry in their reports.

The press tribunes were packed with a representative from every UK newspaper and major news

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agency that day. Even though it took an all-English final on a Monday to do so, it showed that squash is not a low-end 'general sport'. It deserves the right to be reported on as any major sport would: player reactions, match reports, analysis or evocative pictures sitting alongside. That will hopefully change to some degree when squash is finally admitted into the Olympics, though the sport still seeks the nod from the International Olympic Committee after three fraught and fruitless bid campaigns attempting to swoon IOC chiefs in recent years.

The World Squash Federation's bid for inclusion to the London 2012 Games was curtailed by a controversial two-thirds majority vote by the IOC's executive committee which saw no sport included, despite squash and karate doing enough to warrant a place.

Four years later, rugby sevens and golf were given preferential treatment for inclusion to the 2016 Rio Games. For the 2020 bid, squash spent a reported £1m and put together the best showcase of the sport's portrayal yet.

The signs looked good. Wrestling, one of the most traditional of Olympic sports, was cut from the Games programme before a last-minute reprieve by the IOC saw the ancient sport put back into the frame for Tokyo. Squash was then left on its knees as the doors of the IOC session in Buenos Aires were thrust open and wrestling rejoiced in the Hilton Hotel basement lobby. It is an image that will stay with me until the sport is finally accepted in.

The IOC suits had scuppered squash's ambition once more. But there was respite in the form of new

IOC president, Thomas Bach, who immediately set about changing the make-up of future Olympics thanks to the German's flexible approach (who had taken over from Jacques Rogge, and who incidentally had a penchant for rugby, having played for Belgium). At the time of writing, Tokyo 2020 hopes remain alive as the IOC charter is rewritten to accommodate Bach's raft of reforms.

For now, squash is showing signs of emerging from two decades sat in a motionless bubble. Players continue to traipse around the world largely unnoticed, promoters continue to put on events, but the commercial side of the sport is showing resurgence as sponsors latch on to the sport's potential at staging events in glamorous locations. January 2015 was also a landmark date for world squash, with the men's and women's tours having merged.

Meanwhile, stories of past glories live on. At each major event, I am usually regaled with yarns by the remaining stalwarts in the media room – *Agence France Presse's* Richard Eaton, long-time photographer Steve Line, *Squash Player* editor Ian McKenzie, squash's long-serving media man Howard Harding, and Alan Thatcher. Hence, this book has been borne out of conversations with the aforementioned names on some of the past players and characters to have graced this great game.

However, not all of squash's illustrious names are featured in *Trading Secrets*. Unfortunately, I couldn't entice Heather McKay or Susan Devoy, two greats of the women's game, to share their triumphs – which match would Heather have chosen in a 19-year

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unbeaten run anyway? – while time ran out on getting hold of a poorly Jansher Khan in Pakistan and Amr Shabana, Egypt's four-time world champion. There is, though, a chapter dedicated to McKay's unrivalled career.

However, one of the aims of the book was to give a flavour of the sport over the last few decades, not just to chart all the top players. I am grateful to those who did commit.

A morning at Azam Khan's house in Ealing was an experience. At the time of my visit, the great Pakistani's own New Grampians Club was being sold off with club membership dwindling. Once he had lamented the sad end to a wonderful chapter, he was away reminiscing on his British Open wins. After my first question Azam then spoke for 40 minutes straight and clearly revelled in recounting the stories.

Hearing from the likes of Chris Dittmar on how he trained in an Adelaide fire station's humidity chamber in a bid to beat the Khans or Rodney Eyles on why he took to unglorified boxing gyms to up his game, were also both illuminating.

And then, just as I was about to submit the book, Egypt's Ramy Ashour won his second world title in Doha, the 2014 final being hailed as perhaps the most remarkable match of all time. Three weeks later, Nicol David, Malaysia's squash queen, won her eighth world title in similar circumstances, the Malaysian saving four match points before overcoming Egyptian Raneem el Weleily in five thrilling games in Cairo. Unfortunately it was too late to make the book, but her 2006 world final win still paved the way to further riches.

I did manage to track Ashour down in New York (it is mystifying but indicative of the sport that the Egyptian, for all his box-office status, largely manages himself) where he was living in an apartment on his own for a three-month training stint. The chapter dedicated to his Qatar crown is made up of several interviews I have conducted with him over the last two years.

Hopefully there will be many more in his presence, if not to spend time with the finest rackets player I have ever seen, including tennis, then to understand what is going on inside the head of this once-in-a-generation Egyptian genius.

He is certainly the most talented I have seen since my first dalliance with squash came as a nine-year-old. I went on to play in my school 1st V and I remember reading reports and looking for results in the newspaper of the top players. Even though I can't recall watching any footage at the time, the names of Eyles, Dittmar and Khan stood out. Nearly 30 years later, those results' recollections were to come to life when their stories were recounted for this book.

Alongside most of the chapters, there are added reflections of the time from *Squash Player Magazine*, the sport's leading publication. I hope you enjoy the musings of these past and present masters of squash as much as I did putting it together. And if you want to understand why the game is so great today, just type in 'Ramy Ashour guitar' on YouTube. You'll have a guaranteed smile by the end of the clip.

Rod Gilmour, January 2015

Broken Rackets And Dirty Tricks

**AZAM KHAN (Pakistan)
1960 British Open Final, Lansdowne Club
Beat Roshan Khan 9-1, 9-0, 9-0**

I WAS just a tennis professional until my brother, Hashim Khan, who died in 2014, won his second World Championship. He came back and said I must take up squash. I only played one game with him when we first played together and I was so tired! It was too much on my legs, but he said I should keep on doing it.

In December 1952, Hashim said he wanted to take me to London. I didn't have any record of note and it was soon the British Championships so I entered into it and won.

In those days, it was a strict entry and only the top 16 could enter. I was denied entry but was given a trial by a Squash Rackets Association official. In those days amateurs were better than British professionals.

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I played him and was very nervous, but beat him 3-1 and was drawn against Alan Fairbairne, the British amateur champion who also played cricket for Middlesex. That was what they did back then, they paired me up in the early rounds. I beat him over 70 minutes and met Hashim in the semi-finals. Until then, I had never lost to anybody. So that's how it started for me.

I went to Scotland soon after and twisted my ankle. I was staying at the hotel and asked Jonny Leslie, by then he was a good friend, to take me to hospital and the doctor gave me an injection so I could keep on playing.

The doctor said, 'Don't come back, as it will happen again.' In the semi-final I played Roy Wilson. Two-love up, the leg started hurting and I was now playing on one leg. He took me to five games and Hashim, who was watching from the gallery, told me to come out and quit. But I wanted to finish and the last game felt like an age!

I tried to retrieve one ball from the back of the court and my leg just gave way. Roy had the whole court and he hit the tin! I still couldn't get up and I was lifted out of the court. The next day I had to play the final against Hashim but I couldn't play on. I took the overnight train back to London and the doctors said I had broken my ankle.

The first time I won against him came at the British Open in 1960. Roshan Khan, who was Jahangir Khan's father, was doing the SRA a favour at the time by playing with several top juniors. In return, they changed the rule, the world number one and number

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two in the same half of the draw. It would mean Roshan would get an easy passage through to the final.

I was playing Hashim in the semi-final and usually, as he was the big brother, I respected him and would never beat him because of that. I didn't want to beat him! I asked him before we went on court whether his leg was holding up. He said it wasn't good, so I said I had better win as Roshan would have beaten him in the final. He agreed to let me win with his permission.

The final at the Lansdowne Club lasted 19 minutes. He got one point in the first game and none in the last two. The spectators had paid £1 per ticket and had made a noise to the SRA as to the quality and length of the final. From that day, the SRA made sure there was a third-place match before the final.

After I won my last British Open in 1962, I went to Canada and won the Open there five times; three times in Toronto and twice in Montreal. In Pakistan, I used to play Hashim and Mohibullah Khan all day. But by now I was coaching in London, having been offered £20 per week. Usually a coach would be offered £6, so I snapped it up.

At the time I was playing lots of exhibitions and in one of them I was playing in long trousers and a sweater. I stepped back to play a forehand shot and I collapsed. I went down on the floor and the Achilles tendon had broken. It felt like someone had stabbed me in the back.

The doctor told me to get to hospital, so I took a taxi to Hammersmith where they told me I would have to have an operation. 'No way!' I said. 'I have to make a championship in Pakistan.' They had sent me

an air ticket and an invitation. The prognosis was that it would take several months for it to heal.

One way or another, another doctor friend said I shouldn't go through with the surgery and he would do it. He did it quickly and the leg was in plaster.

At the same time, my 14-year-old son was ill and he was taken to the doctor for tablets. He was getting worse and worse and he told me one night not to go to the squash club to coach. That evening it worsened and we went straight to the hospital. The doctors said there was little chance of survival; I was told there were brain and chest problems.

I took his body back to Peshawar for burial and I was there for two months. I just lost interest with the world after that. Meanwhile, my leg wound was bleeding at this stage and I never had the time to go through physiotherapy to make it stronger.

When I went back to London, I mainly stayed at the club, New Grampians, in Shepherd's Bush. I can't forget him and I still have his photo by my bed.

The following year, the organisers of the Pakistan Championships said that if I could play then I was invited. I still could hardly walk. But a friend who had travelled with me said I should play and it wouldn't matter if I lost in the first round. It would be a chance to see my family and visit my son.

Most of the top players who entered, slept and ate at the club. It was eat, drink, sleep, train for a month. The atmosphere at the club was also very hot! I only had four people supporting me – club members from London who had travelled out also for the championship.

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I had to laugh, knowing everyone wanted me to lose. But when you are younger you can do anything, you are strong. So I decided I must win. Why should I lose to these people, even if I was limping? I won through to the final and I was to play Roshan.

It was to be the toughest match of my life. In those days, there was no penalty so the player could do whatever he wanted to stop the other player. If he put his leg in the way to stop me retrieving a ball, the opponent could do this.

I told Roshan not to do any of this though. I said to him that I would have no trouble hitting him with my racket, which I had done before! During one point, he played a drop and I ran forward. When he saw me coming to put the ball away, he put his body in the way.

I also had to contend with cement floors, unlike the wooden floors in England. It was so hot on court. Every point I played I wanted to jump in the swimming pool and this lasted for over two hours and five games.

There was no television recording back then, but everyone who was there said they had witnessed something that would never be seen again.

A few days later I met Roshan again in the Pakistan Open Final. First game, I remember I lost 9-0 and one of the Pakistanis said, 'Now you get the lesson!' But Roshan was also up to his dirty tricks by sticking his leg out and preventing me from reaching the ball.

As I've said, I had hit him before with my racket and was close to doing it again. Again, I laughed to myself. I won the next game before he won the third. The concrete floors were now killing me and my shoes

too. I went through three pairs in ten days of squash as I dragged my feet on the floor. I was in pain and bleeding too.

I managed to win again in five games over two hours. I broke a racket as well in the final as I eventually lost patience and hit his leg in trying to make my shot. He was very keen to get his revenge and he was very good then.

But my aim was to keep the ball alive and keep the ball away from him as much as possible. I knew that if I made him work I was going to win. That's the idea of this game after all; you mustn't hit the ball back to your opponent.

Against Roshan, all I was trying to do was to keep him out of position and then hit the front wall and the nick. These days, I rarely see players hitting that nick, it's all up and down, but the Egyptians like to do it.

We never used to let the ball go to the back wall and we caught the ball in the middle of the court. You might not be able to retrieve if you let it go to the back – and if you did you would probably lose the return and your opponent would put it away.

At that time of my career, you only won £50 to win the World Championship. My last British Open win had come in 1962, before the Egyptian Abou Taleb said in the press that if anyone was able to get a game off him he would give them £500. Some of the top squash officials were very upset about this challenge.

Peter Chalk, who was then the vice president of the SRA, was a good friend and living nearby to New Grampians. He said, 'Look, you must play him.' I told

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Peter I had lost interest in the sport after losing my son. But he was adamant I could beat Taleb 'with his big mouth'.

Well, I accepted the challenge to play an exhibition challenge match at the Grampians, which was announced in the *Times* newspaper. For some reason, Taleb got edgy and backed out and reasoned that if he lost and returned to Egypt they would 'cut my head off back home' and he would have to live in another country. He knew he was going to lose but he just wanted £1,000 in his pocket before he played.

Anyway, the members at my club – one of them was a top divorce barrister – decided they wanted to bring in a young player called Jonah Barrington and for me to train him. In those days, the court timings were 45 minutes and Jonah could only stay on court for 20 minutes. He was a very bad sportsman then, always crying! I said to him, 'You want to be champion, you stay on court for 45 minutes. If you don't then you're free to go.'

He was doing milk rounds at the time and Jonah soon kept staying and playing. The British Open was looming and he was keen, so after every milk round he would come to the club. In the build-up, I played him and beat him 9-0, 9-0, 9-0 and he was upset by this in the changing room. He refused to play in the championship, but I told him to keep running and playing the ball away from his opponent and he would win the title.

I persuaded him to play and he won the first of his many British Open titles, in 1967. I was still not interested in playing and by now all the top players

were coming to visit and I began to do more lessons. It suited me.

How I Got Fit...

I tell you the truth here: myself and Hashim did no exercise. We used to play the British Open and go back to Pakistan in April and play tennis throughout the summer. When Hashim first came over and won the British Open in the early 1950s, a reporter asked him how he was so fit. He said he did 1,000 press-ups and people started copying him. But he wasn't doing anything, but they still reported it! The only exercise we did was on court, by playing yourself. All the people we met were doing gym work and exercise, but I can tell you we did no such routines.