



Squash phenomenon Greg Gaultier makes 'determination look almost elegant'

STAYING IN THE GAME

For squash champ Greg Gaultier, it's all about perseverance— and heart

BY NOAH DAVIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DIRK REES

GREG GAULTIER'S GIFT REVEALED ITSELF DURING A single point of his 2006 Tournament of Champions quarter final match against Peter Nicol. The Frenchman hit 34 shots in the 97-second rally, displaying the innovative style that would help him reach number one in the Professional Squash Association's (PSA) rankings three years later. Gaultier moved Nicol around the court with inch-perfect shots to the back wall, overhead smashes, deft drop shots and crafty cross-court blasts off the tensed strings of his racket.

But what one noticed most was the then 23-year-old's quickness and superhuman desire. While his youthful shotmaking was inconsistent

— a loose forehand followed a brilliant backhand — he flew side to side and back to front; retrieving drop shots and lobs, always returning to the middle of the court prepared to chase the next ball.

'I can do big lunges and come back quick,' he says now from his home in Aix-en-Provence. 'There aren't a lot of people who can move like that.' His play was far from effortless, but he made determination look almost elegant: See ball, get ball, hit ball. Repeat. Heart is a beautiful thing to witness.

Eventually, however, the Frenchman lost the point. (In squash, this happens either when the ball touches the floor for the >>

second time or when a player fails to hit it above a 48cm-high horizontal line on the front wall called 'the tin' because it was once made from a flat sheet of metal.) Still, the crowd exploded at the display Gaultier and Nicol provided. 'I remember it well,' he says. 'It was the rally of the year in 2006, and I have watched it many times.'

This is the type of effort Gaultier's fans enjoy on a regular basis. He has no other choice. His story is not one of a dramatic underdog, but he isn't squash royalty either. He's worked for everything. Hard.

Gaultier's parents managed a squash club in the 1980s and their four-year-old son found his way into the game. He took to it almost immediately. At nine, he was spending his weekends travelling to Strasbourg, France, the country's squash centre, to train with Andre Delhoste, who remains his coach. (Delhoste also handles the French men's national team.) 'I knew I would be a professional by age 11 or 12,' Gaultier says. By 13 he was beating every adult in eastern France.

He continued to improve his game under Delhoste's tutelage, winning the European junior squash championship in 2000 and 2001 and reaching the finals of the world junior championship. He has a reputation for his impressive elasticity – earning the nickname 'Rubbery' Gaultier – although the player insists he is muscle and sinew just like his competitors. 'I'm flexible but not like elastic.'

After turning pro, Gaultier steadily rose through the rankings. Although he cites winning the 2007 British Open against great friend and countryman Thierry Lincou as the highlight of his career, a casual observer would say that his greatest achievement came in 2009. After six months as the world's second-ranked player, he reached the top slot in November of that year. Gaultier and Lincou are the only Frenchmen to accomplish this feat, an impressive achievement in a sport dominated by the English and Egyptians who held seven of the top nine spots in June 2011.

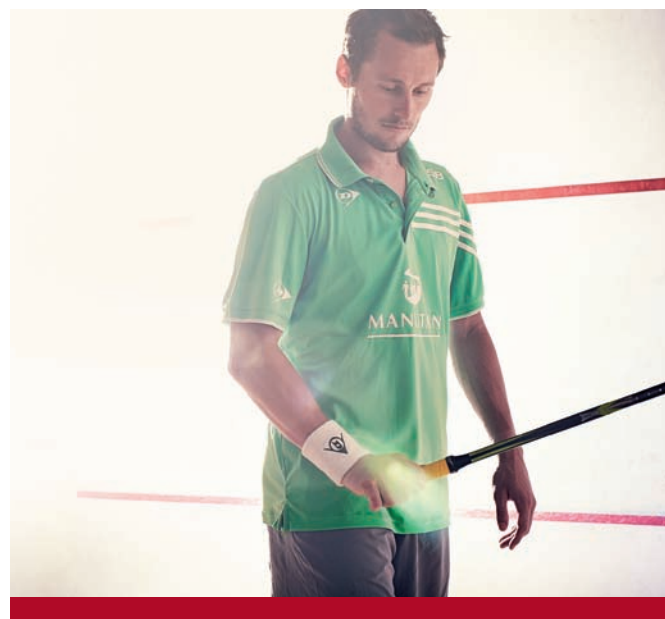
GAULTIER ONLY SPENT A MONTH AT NUMBER ONE. HE missed time in 2010 with a torn hamstring, which robbed him of his astonishing quickness. While recuperating, he realised he needed to compensate in other ways. Delhoste says his charge is 'getting more clairvoyant' on the court.

'When you get older, you have to change your training. You can't do what you used to do,' Gaultier says. 'You have to adapt to the game. It has changed through the years. It is more intense now.'

As a result, he also works to increase his mental stamina and focus. Although Delhoste first noticed the young Gaultier because of his ability to stay present on the court for 80 minutes, the player has a distracting tendency to scream at referees and opponents, especially when he plays poorly.

To combat this, Gaultier meets with a sports psychologist and performs visualisation exercises. 'You want to have already seen the points so you can anticipate what is going to happen when you get onto the court,' he says. 'In the end, what keeps you up is your head. There is not much difference between the top players in terms of skill, so the little details make the difference.'

Lincou explains it differently: 'I think that he can spend less mental energy and make an effort to try to win with less tension in his body and mind.' But some might argue that better mental



'YOU HAVE TO ADAPT TO THE GAME'

focus is more essential than ever as rule changes have shortened the length of matches. While winning is achieved by best-of-five affairs, games are to 11 with a point scored each serve. The result is a faster, more aggressive match where every point is vital.

'It used to be that the one with the most endurance would win but now you need a good balance between being fit and being skilful,' Gaultier says. 'I need to get better and more accurate with the ball.'

Gaultier, ranked number six in June 2011, is thriving again on the court. He battled back from a serious bout of depression and poor form in 2010, as well as an injury in early 2011, and has reached the semi-finals of two of the three tournaments he's played so far this year. His opponents say he's better prepared physically and stronger mentally.

'I stopped for a while and had a good break. And then suddenly my love of the game came back,' Gaultier says. 'I decided to stop being negative and didn't want to throw something away like this. At the end of the day, you do this for pleasure. It's a nice job. It could be 10 times worse. Once you enjoy, you suddenly play well again. That was the turning point.'

When Gaultier steps onto the court carrying his high-performance Dunlop Biomimetic Elite racket, wearing his Adidas shoes and kit, and warming up his strong but delicate wrists, he thinks about one goal: returning to the top of the PSA rankings.

Delhoste believes Gaultier can reach the pinnacle again. So does Lincou. Most importantly, the player himself knows he can as well. 'That's why I keep playing,' he says. 'To reach it or not reach it is something, but to not have the aim, I think I would quit squash.'

Gaultier isn't one to quit easily. The 2006 championship is just one example. After losing the long rally to Nicol, he quickly gave away the game and fell into a 2-1 hole... But he kept pushing.

'I lost the point, got tired and lost the game,' he says. Two games later, he won the match. □

POWER PLAY

THIS EXPERIMENTAL CREATION FROM HONG KONG-BASED MISA DIGITAL IS AN EYE-CATCHING ATTEMPT TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THE ELECTRIC GUITAR AND THE SYNTHESIZER

BY SIMON HEPTINSTALL

THE KITARA RETAINS THE shape of an electric guitar but produces digital notes that can be shaped and transformed into almost any sound.

The player's left hand plays notes by pressing buttons where there would normally be strings and frets. Meanwhile, the right hand operates a touch-sensitive pad on the guitar's body that can be tapped, poked and strummed.

You can even set the Kitara to a 'virtual string mode' where six lines appear on the pad for picking or strumming. One reviewer said: 'If you'd handed one of these to Duran Duran in the eighties, it would probably have caused a guitar solo that would still be going on now.' The Kitara costs about the same as a normal electric guitar. □

> misadigital.com

NECK

Features 144 note buttons across 24 frets. Each button represents a different musical tone. Default-tuned like a conventional guitar.

TOUCH SCREEN

Shows playing mode and settings. Touch, tap, pluck or slide to play and apply effects such as reverb, delay and distortion.

BODY

Made of high-density polymer, it houses features such as a polyphonic synthesizer and MIDI controls.



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