

Egypt's age of squash

By Eman Abdel-Moeti

Egypt has produced many squash world champions. Since the forties, when Abdel-Fattah Pasha Amr won the world title, Egyptian teams and players have taken top spot on a number of occasions – the most famous being Gamal Awad's marathon match against Pakistan's Jahangir Khan in the final of the World Championship in the seventies. And those Egyptian players, who have made it to the World Championship finals but have not taken the top prize, have always given their opponents a hard time.

Egypt has never had a huge number of squash players -- no more than a hundred in the best of times -- but the country has still managed to notch up a series of impressive placings. In the World Teams Championships, for example, Egypt came fourth in 1971, 1976, 1979, 1983, 1991 and 1997, and third in 1977 and 1995.

In the seventies, many of the country's top players could only pursue the sport on a professional level in countries like England and Germany, where they were able to train with world class players who attended the British and German Opens. The members of one of the teams in the seventies – Abbas Kaoud, Ahmed Safwat, and **Galal Allam** – managed to make a living in Europe training young, promising players at the same time as collecting prize money.

Until recently, the concept of the professional player was unknown in Egypt and it was difficult for Egyptian players to maintain the country's record of achievement in the sport.

Ahmed Barada was the country's first professional. He managed to secure sponsorship from businessman Ibrahim Kamel, after he was introduced to him by his Maadi club coach Abdel-Wahed Abdel-Aziz. This funding meant Barada could concentrate on his sport and he quickly achieved fifth-place ranking in the world. He is currently number seven.

But for many players who do not have sponsorship, dividing their time between education and sport has meant a slower progression up the international league table. Amir Wagih is currently ranked 20th in the world, Amr Shabana 24th, Omar El-Brollossy 29th, Ahmed Faizy 43rd and Karim El-Mistikawi 55th.

Technically, the Egyptian Federation is supposed to provide sponsorship for players, but with a budget of only LE400 to LE600 thousand, granted by the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports, there is not enough to go around. The budget is enough to send senior and junior national teams to the World Championships but if any player wants to collect more points to better their rankings, they have to rely on their own resources. The Shabana family, for example, whose son and daughter Amr and Salma are both professional squash players, spends almost LE250,000 a year on each of their children.

Al-Ahram recently took up the role of providing sponsorship to players, to enable them to better themselves in the sport.

Surprisingly, given the difficulties, Egypt has produced a new crop of world class players each year since 1994. Perhaps what the country is now witnessing is a golden age in squash, holding its own against countries like England, Pakistan and Australia. Furthermore, Egypt's junior national team managed to pull off an unexpected second place in the teams event of the recent World Championships. They were expected to reach fourth place at best.

As the country gets more and more used to the concept of the professional squash player, there is hope that we will sustain more generations of world class players.