

# EXIT STAGE LEFT:

# NICOL DAVID & RAMY ASHOUR RETIRE

BY JAMES ZUG

**W**ithin four weeks of each other this spring, Nicol David and Ramy Ashour, two of the greatest, most electrifying players in squash history, stepped down from the professional tour and retired.

They had similar careers. Prodigies, each were the first to capture the World Juniors twice. Each dominated the pro game, winning every major event and putting together remarkable unbeaten streaks—fifteen months, forty-nine matches for Ashour; sixteen months and sixty matches for David. In the process they revolutionized the world tour. David pushed women's squash to new heights of athleticism with her incredible speed and anticipation. She proved that the seventeen-inch tin, long thought impossible for women pros, was in fact necessary. Ashour, with his amazing deception and touch, moved the men's game away from the blocking, attritional style for good. He opened up squash, breathing in the air of creativity.

Both were outrageously gifted but hiding behind the talent was diligent, hard work. Both went into exile—David to Amsterdam, Ashour to New

York—where they could anonymously practice their craft. Both modeled sportsmanship. Both were enormous hits with fans and the media, owning the highest Q-rating of any squash players. (When they retired David had about 300,000 Twitter followers, 900,000 Facebook followers and 100,000 Instagram followers; Ashour had 38,000 at Twitter, 150,000 at Facebook and 75,000 at Instagram.) Both gave back, going on World Squash Federation ambassador tours and joining the bids for inclusion into the Olympic Games: "What would it mean? Everything."

The two major developments in pro squash in the twenty teens are their legacies. David was essential to the pioneering implementation of prize-money parity, starting at the U.S. Open in 2013, and the 2015 merger of the men's and women's pro tours. Only someone with her unsurpassed record, integrity, popularity and charm could have led on both potentially-fraught initiatives. Again and again, you heard: "We've got to do this because of Nicol."

SquashTV was Ramy Ashour's playground. His shotmaking, his fluid athleticism, his tactics, his astonishing deception—he was born

for a live broadcast from Doha or Zurich, streamed to your laptop, tablet or phone. In February at the World Championships in Chicago, SquashTV told me that the numbers leapt when Ashour was on court. He was the only player who moved the needle. It was his points (the 2013 Tournament of Champions guitar-strumming rally with Gregory Gaultier, viewed 450,000 times on YouTube) and his matches (the 2014 World Championship final in Qatar with Mohamed ElShorbagy, viewed more than 350,000 times) that went viral. The most watched replays in history are Ramy Ashour replays.



playing from a match from May to December 2014 and then capturing the World Championship in his first tournament back. But it also meant pulling out of tournaments, mid-match retirements (five times in the last four years of his career) and prolonged absences from the tour.

Their exits were different too. In late April Ashour announced his retirement with a five-minute video (watched 40,000 times in the first week), leaving everyone saddened because there was no in-person goodbye. He was ranked world No. 211 at that moment. His last appearance, it turned out, was



Nicol David and Ramy Ashour were the icons of their generation. Some enormous differences, though, separate the two. David was coached by Liz Irving, an amazing partnership, and blessed with a full team of physios and therapists. Ashour famously went solo—for many years he had no coach. David managed to avoid a significant injury throughout her career; only once in her 943 matches did she retire mid-match—the Milo Open in 1998, her first pro event, age thirteen. Juxtapose that to Ashour: starting with his knee injury at age thirteen, he was plagued with issues, particularly with his knee and hamstring. The layoffs gave him the opportunity to pull off outrageous comebacks—like not

a year earlier in Hull in the 2018 British Open when he lost to eventual winner Miguel Angel Rodriguez in a four-game opening-round match. On the other hand, David played in six events after announcing her retirement in February—four countries, three continents, on-court presentations, standing ovations.

In the end, do you want to watch your favorite player exit a little past her prime, still very good (David retired in the top twenty) but no longer at her best or do you want to live with the ineffable sadness at what might have been with Ashour, what was lost because of all the injuries? As with every ending, regret is the other side of the retirement coin.

# FEATURES

## ▶ BY THE NUMBERS

### WORLD JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIPS

ASHOUR: 2  
DAVID: 2

### WORLD NO.1 RANKING

ASHOUR: 21 MONTHS  
DAVID: 112 MONTHS

### TOUR TITLES

ASHOUR: 40  
DAVID: 81

### WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

ASHOUR: 3  
DAVID: 8

### U.S. OPENS

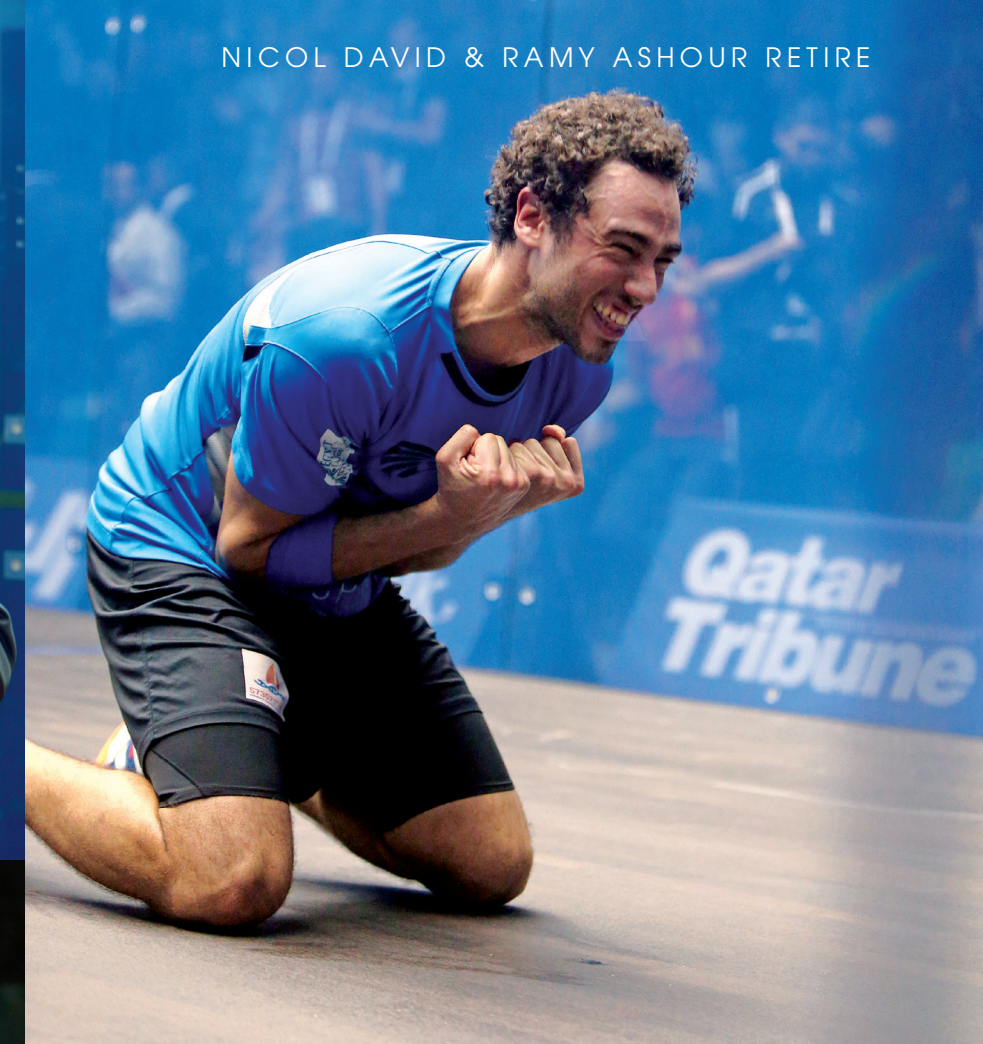
ASHOUR: 1  
DAVID: 3

### FIRST TITLE

ASHOUR: ATHENS OPEN, NOV. 2004  
DAVID: FINNISH OPEN, MAY 2000

### LAST PSA TITLE

ASHOUR: GRASSHOPPER CUP, MARCH 2018  
DAVID: CIUDAD DE FLORIDABLANCA, MARCH 2017



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# WE ARE NOT PROPHETS

*Outside The Glass, the world's oldest squash podcast, is a radio show with a new episode dropping at the beginning of each month. OTG episodes, produced by US Squash, are available on podcast apps like Apple Podcasts, Overcast and SoundCloud. In episode forty-one Ramy Ashour spoke about his squash career.*

**OUTSIDE THE GLASS:**

What have injuries taught you?

**RAMY ASHOUR:**

They've been so valuable. They taught me to be very good with my hands. They taught me patience, understanding, how to deal with struggling. They taught me to take chances—when you have a chance, take it. They taught me to be more alert, to be more self-conscious, more self-aware, to understand myself, who I am as a person.

I never believed in stretching and mobility and flexibility when I was a junior. I was always flexible but I never believed in the core stuff, the isometric stuff and the muscle activation, the glutes and the hams. I never believed in these things until my injuries made me believe in these things. That these things can make you play. They are huge. They can actually make you play or not, for me in my case.

It's all the small habits you do every day, the small things you do every day, the boring things you do every day. It is not fun. It's very boring. It's very boring. It's very boring. It's good when you win. It's good when you feel good. It's not good during the week. It's good at the end of the week. It's not good at the



beginning of the week. It's only good at the end of the week. By the same time, you cannot not do it. It's your job. It's what you wake up for. That's what you are trying to get better at. You are doing something that you are so lucky doing. You are not sitting an office where you have to do a certain amount of hours. You are your own boss at the end of the day. You can't complain about it. Everything has its own struggles. Everything comes at a cost. I didn't believe in a lot of small things but now I'm doing these small things a lot.

**OTG:**

It is about building a habit without noticing?

**RA:**

Yes, this is about the mentality of the top players, top players who want more. You are always feeling guilty. You are holding yourself accountable for things. You are always holding yourself accountable. Our mentality is hard to deal with. You are constantly running after yourself, trying to catch something that you don't know exactly until you win.

Maybe we work three or four hours a day, tops. But your mental capacity is huge. It's hard to do things next to squash. I can't look at anything. You feel like you've been in an office for two days

after a three-hour workout. It is so incredible.

You burn a lot of calories just thinking. For me I always have to think about my weeks: how do I plan them? I am my own coach. What do I do for fitness. The tournament for me are the easier part: you don't have to think. I just play and leave. Training for me is the hardest part. It is laundry—like a washing machine.

I am just fighting, trying to figure it out and understand. I didn't realize that staying positive was so hard. I thought it was just a sentence. I didn't understand it. It's not an easy thing to be positive. People say, "Just be positive. Don't care about anything. Be ambitious. Wake up in the morning with a smile." That doesn't mean anything, really. Why would I wake up with a smile? There has to be a reason to wake up for me with a smile. I have to have a plan to wake up with a smile. This smile is going to take me somewhere.



I don't like this idealistic thing.

Social media is always trying to get you to this ideal place. We are not prophets. We are just normal human beings who do something better than others. As long as you are peaceful with yourself and working hard, you have to do what is going to make you a better person. Just be good to people and try to do something for yourself and the people around you and just try to work hard. I hate this idea that everything should be perfect.

Changing yourself is tough. This has to be said first for people who trying to get somewhere. You tell them, "ah, just go out and train and be positive." How can you positive if you don't have a plan. How can you work hard if you don't have the reason?

It is not easy to just be positive and be smiling all the time. Why do I smile? When I smile, it makes life easier. This is my plan. It makes life easier. It sends signals to my head that I can do it.





# WORLD CHAMPIONS ARE A DIFFERENT BREED

In episode forty-three, Liz Irving, the former world No. 2 and coaching guru, took listeners behind the scenes as she explained how she coached Nicol David for sixteen years.



**OUTSIDE THE GLASS:**

What was Nicol like to work with?

**LIZ IRVING:**

Nicol David has the X factor. I saw that when she was young, when I first saw her train when she was fourteen. She loved to work hard. Her willingness to learn and work hard—she had an amazing work ethic. Her desire to win is very strong. There is talent everywhere; it is what you do with it that counts.

Nicol was a dream to work with. She never missed a day's training. She could really adapt, really learn quickly. She never was injured. Very surface niggles. She's genetically blessed but she also took advantage of her opportunities. Malaysia gave her a lot of opportunities. She loved to work hard but it was all quality-based work. She never over-trained. She always had a proper rest day each week. Nicol was destined to be a world champion. She had shown her potential. She had the ability to win the World Open once or twice if she never worked on her game. That was clear. But the question was about longevity: could she repeat, could she win the title again and again?



Coaching is always about helping players reach their full potential. It is not about them reaching a certain level, a certain ranking. The ranking will find its place. You've got to set realistic goals and constantly reassess those goals.

**OTG:**

What was the actual process in elevating her game?



**LI:**

There is a huge gap between junior and senior play. It was a three-year process with Nicol. She had to learn how to think tactically, the thought process, shots she's trying to play, capitalizing on opportunities. The fundamental basics were strong but she had been coached for a long time and everything was very ingrained. Juniors need to learn to think for themselves and problem solve on their own. We had to strip it back and rebuild: work on her swing, getting more cut on the ball, not flattening the swing. Depth of play, angles, short game, strategy. Restructuring her footwork and movement. And player awareness: where's your opponent?

She had to be more active in her thinking. Do you want to send your opponent far away or wrong-foot them? And it had to get into her sub-conscious. You can't see your opponent. You have no time to think.

World champions are a different breed. They have that little something extra that gets them over the line. If you want to be a world champion, you've got to mix with world champions. So I sent Nicol to train with Sarah Fitz-Gerald. It had a massive impact. Also, Nicol had to bring the volley into her game, and Fitzy was the master of the volley.

Coaching is more than simply getting on court for an hour each day. I needed to make sure the base was set, that she was comfortable, that she had a stable life in Amsterdam.

It was supposed to be a three-year process. When she won her first world title in Hong Kong in 2005, she came off the court and sat next to me. "You weren't supposed to win that," I joked. "It's a year early."

**OTG:**

What did you talk about in between games during matches?

**LI:**

Nicol is a completely different player from me. I was careful with her to avoid cloning me. I worked with her strengths and her personality. In between games, I would be very calm. You can't yell at a player or fire off ten different things to do. I'd pick one or two things that she could switch back into. Nothing complex. I wouldn't tell her anything new but reinforce what she had been practicing and preparing. Coaches dream of telling a player something and it happens the next game. That was the beauty of Nicol. You'd see it the next game.

Nicol would be in the zone for every match. If she wasn't, she'd lose. You could see it in her eyes before she went out on court. She'd block everything out. She had been doing visualization and mental skills training since she was twelve. **SM**