

The best of British

Rod Gilmour previews the National Championships in Manchester from February 12 to 16

THE LOWDOWN

The National Squash Centre has cemented itself as the home of the National Championships after more than a decade hosting the event. Expect a multitude of activities and trade stands off court, as well as 15 events in the over 35-75 categories.

CHAMPIONSHIPS IN NUMBERS

- 4** – Manchester finals lost by Lee Beachill and Alison Waters
- 10** – price of admission for the first two days. With seven courts in use, this represents fantastic value
- 12** – National Championships held at the National Squash Centre
- 77** – the current age of Pat Kirton, last year's over-75 British National - and Open - champion

COURT WATCH

Built at a cost of £110,000 for the 2002 Commonwealth Games, the moveable show court continues to dominate proceedings. It is a permanent structure at the Centre and has never been collapsed – unlike other courts on the world tours – which players say makes the ball move faster than anywhere else.

WHAT WE...

- Will see:** Nick Matthew happily signing copies of his autobiography for eager kids.
- Would like to see:** Organisers hiring knowledgeable actors to sit in the stands and gee up the notoriously quiet crowds.
- Won't see:** Empty galleries.

HISTORY CHANCE

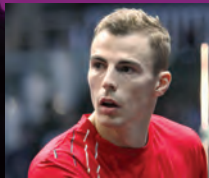
Cassie Jackman (1993, 1999-2000 and 2002-4) is still the only player to have won six national titles. However, Nick Matthew, who last year became the first man to claim five, has the chance to equal Jackman's record.

WHAT THE NATIONALS MEAN...

"I won my first title aged 17 and I don't think I really thought about it much at that age; no pressure and on a 'roll'. The standard and depth of British women's squash in the mid-80s and 90s was exceptional, so winning the Nationals was a big deal, as there were a number of UK players in the top 10 in the world throughout this era."

Lisa Opie, three-time champion

MEN TO WATCH



Nick Matthew

Is there any stopping the Matthew juggernaut? Many thought the Englishman was on

a downward spiral last year, but a rejigged schedule to complement his 15th year on the PSA Tour brought renewed vigour and a third world title. Matthew will be the star turn in Manchester, will be full of confidence and is outright favourite to land a sixth national crown. There will be more pressing titles to win this year, including Commonwealth gold, but he will still be aiming to become the first man to win three in a row.



James Willstrop

The former world no.1 has beaten Matthew only once in Manchester, in the 2003 British Under-23

Championship final. He has twice finished national runner-up to his rival in the last two years and another year goes on with questions raised over Willstrop's ability to cross the winning line against Matthew. The 30-year-old has brought a fresh training schedule and diet into his game, though, and there is still the belief he can return to the top of the sport. A third national title will be a major spur to his 2014 campaign.



Peter Barker

Beware the player keeping his distance. The Essex 30-year-old had other worries at last year's

British Open with his partner due to give birth, while he saw his World Championship end in second-round agony and injury. He has been nursed back to full fitness, though, thanks to ESR's unrivalled support and has turned down requests for interviews with the aim of returning to tournament play under the radar.



Dark horse...

Daryl Selby

Quarter-final appearances at the World Championship and Qatar Open in November thrust Selby back into the

world top 10. In Manchester he will want to atone for his quarter-final defeat to Tom Richards last year and match the form that propelled him to the 2011 national title. He has found fluidity in both movement and performance in recent months, and is more than capable of reaching another final, if he can also combine temperament and consistency.

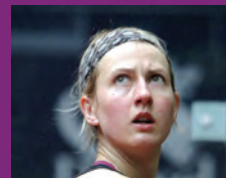
WOMEN'S CHALLENGERS



Laura Massaro

Last May, after being told she had become the first British Open winner since Lisa Opie in 1991, Massaro

was left open-mouthed. Her pride back then will serve her well at the Nationals, when she will look to win a third title. She may be world no.2 and currently the only real challenger to Malaysian squash queen Nicol David, but the Nationals will also serve as a reminder of how her compatriots will be no pushover.



Alison Waters

Has there been a more consistent challenger to the women's title than Waters? Since 2005 she

has been runner-up four times and last year added a third title, reversing her 2012 defeat to Laura Massaro with a thrilling five-game win. After a 2012 blighted by injury she produced a consistent year on the WSA Tour in 2013, staying at world no.4 for all but two months. A determined, gritty player, she will be out to retain her title.



Dark horse...

Sarah-Jane Perry

The world top 20 player made her breakthrough in 2013 and will be

a major threat to go beyond her quarter-final appearance last year. The Warwickshire right-hander won back-to-back WSA titles in Canada last April before making her England debut at the European Team Championship. However, she suffered two stress fractures in one of her lumbar spine vertebrae which ruled her out of action from September. Rehab has made her stronger, both physically and mentally, and a fresh Perry, aged 23, could upset the odds in Manchester.