



Lunge like an Egyptian: Karim Darwish (left) takes on Ramy Ashour in the all-Egypt 2008 World Championship final in Manchester, England.

BALLBREAKER

Underestimate the physical and mental examination of squash and prepare for pain, writes IVAN SMITH

I am 13 years old. I play football every lunchtime at school, matches at weekends and squash every chance I get. I am as fit as I will ever be in my life. Yet I am staggering around a squash court on rubber legs, being run from wall to wall, thrashed – murdered – by a fat, 50-year-old bloke. He barely needs to move: he knows every angle, every shot. Experience

beats youth 9-0 9-0 9-0. I think: I hate this game. But I also love it.

WHY I LOVE SQUASH

Squash is the original mind and body tester. It's like chess with added running. As a junior, I took part in club nights, where every half-hour you played a new, random opponent – every one a different standard, with

different tactics and different fitness. Including those old guys who'd been thinking about the game for 30 years.

The best and worst thing about squash is that it never leaves you alone. With the ball bouncing off four walls and the floor, most rallies are seemingly endless lung-busting strokes of sprint-stop-turn, again and again. Each shot needs instant decisions on placement

and pace, as you try to put the ball beyond your opponent's reach, so the damn thing doesn't come back again. You often see players walking slowly to their serve or receive positions between points, because this is the only chance they get for a breather. Sometimes, after an especially epic point, there's an unspoken agreement to pause for a few seconds longer, just so you don't pass out.

Professionals almost seem to be strolling around, but the effort is intense at any level. Squash players are renowned for their total fitness. Jahangir Khan, probably the greatest ever player, ran 15km every morning, followed it up with a swim, then spent hours in the afternoon either sprint-training or playing squash. Another Pakistani champion,