

EGYPT'S

By Nathan Clarke

GAME CHANGER

As Nour El Sherbini proudly cradled her fourth World Championship title, with the iconic Pyramids of Giza standing immense in the background, Egypt's total dominance of modern women's squash was underlined.

El Sherbini, at just 24, secured her fourth crown in six years, defeating compatriot and World No.1 Raneem El Welily in what was the fourth consecutive all-Egyptian women's world championship final - and the third between the duo.

Such is the nation's strength that both losing semi-finalists - Hania El Hammamy and Nouran Gohar - were also Egyptian, while then World No.3 Nour El Tayeb didn't even feature in the latter stages.

El Welily (No.1), El Sherbini (No.2), Gohar (No.3) and El Tayeb (No.4) also currently have a stranglehold on the top positions in the world rankings - the first quartet from one nation ever to have such dominance - while El Hammamy (No.10), completes a five-strong presence inside the world's top ten.

Indeed, since El Welily ended Malaysian superstar Nicol David's phenomenal nine-year reign as World No.1 in September 2015, Egypt have won 31 of 45 major events - with a staggering 24 of those finals all-Egyptian affairs. Only three of those 45 finals have been contested without Egyptian presence.

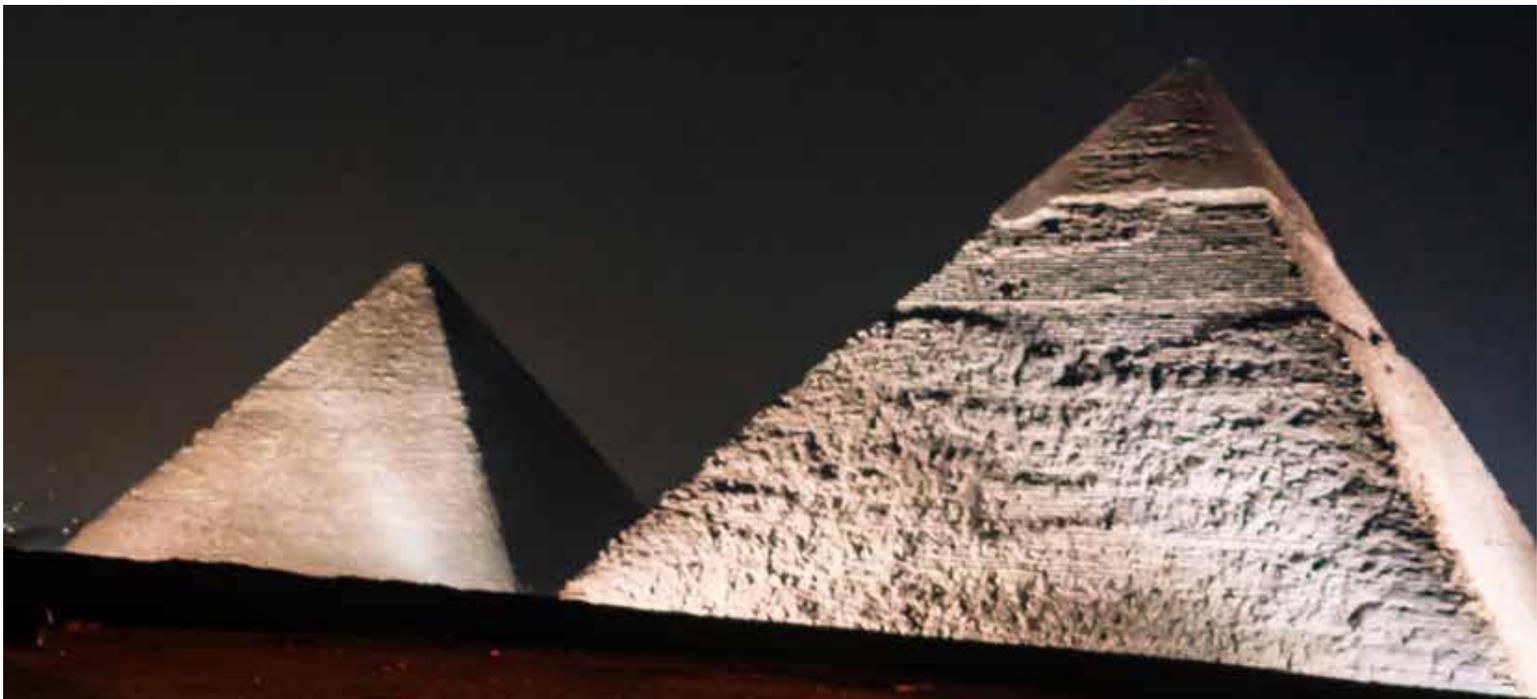
But rewind the clock 30 years and the prospect of Egyptian women dominating the squash world couldn't have been further from reality.

According to statistics, in 1992 there were just six girls playing squash in Egypt. There were no Egyptian females on the PSA World Tour and no Egyptian females had ever competed in an international event at either junior or senior level.

That Egypt has gone from zero to world domination in just two decades is largely thanks to the pioneering efforts of one woman - Dr Samiha Aboul Magd, a Professor of Ophthalmology and squash enthusiast who in 1992 became the first woman to join

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the Egyptian Squash Federation - a moment that changed the face of the game forever.

"Without her, we would not be where we are today and women's squash in Egypt would not be anywhere near where it is," said El Wellily.

"She fought for women's squash every day at a time when there was no support for women's sport. Before her, women's squash in Egypt was nothing and I don't think that we would have had, or maybe even now wouldn't have, a women's team if it wasn't for her impact on the sport."

As Egyptian champion for almost a decade, Dr Samiha became the first Egyptian female to qualify for the British Open in 1980, and again in 1981, where on both occasions she was inspired by the level of women's squash she was able to watch.

Those experiences at the British Open sparked a flame that set Dr Samiha on a mission to bring women's squash to Egypt - a mission that finally came to fruition in 1992, when after months of persuading, she was given permission to take a team of three girls to the 1993 World Junior Championships in Malaysia.

"She was the national Egyptian champion at a time when there was very little competition in the game, so when she came to the British Open in 1980, we knew very little of her," said Andrew Shelley, former World Squash CEO, who first encountered Dr Samiha during that 1980 British Open.

"But her passion for the game, and her passion for women's squash, were evident from our first meeting and you could tell that she was a force of nature. When she joined the Egyptian Federation in 1992, she became the driving force behind the growth of women's squash in the country."

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Squash Historian

"She was a truly lovely woman, who I have been fortunate to count as a friend for so many years. She was called the 'Mother of Egyptian squash' on account of her impact, but also because she became like a parent to those girls during that 1993 and subsequent championships. Her motivation was deep set and it was she that pushed the clubs and federation to develop the girls game in the country."

While she was given the green light to take a team to the 1993 Championships, it was in testing condition. While most teams travelled with four players, a coach and support team, Dr Samiha had been allowed to take just three girls and no coaches.

So, acting as parent, nutritionist, coach and guardian, she, along with players Maha Zein, Salma Shabana and May Hegazy, travelled to Kuala Lumpur, where they stunned the squash world.

"She takes three girls to the World Juniors in 1993, she wasn't allowed a coach or a trainer, and these girls, who have never been outside of Egypt before, not only do they play in this event, they get to the semi-finals and beat England in the third place play off," said squash historian James Zug.

"From nothing, these girls under Dr Samiha's guidance, they upset the status quo and make a name for themselves in the international scene.

"Fast forward to 1996 and the iconic Al Ahram tournament happens, Ahmed Barada gets to the final and it's an incredible moment for Egyptian squash as the sport suddenly becomes known about. Thousands of youngsters then take up the sport and its not just boys, but girls and women as well. Without Dr Samiha's work in the years previous there would have been no avenue for those girls to go down."

From a debut team appearance in 1993, Dr Samiha then helped guide Salma Shabana to third place in the junior individual championship in 1995 before guiding the junior team to victory at the 1999 World Junior Championships.

In 2003 it was Omneya Abdel Kawy, one of Dr Samiha's first prodigies, who became Egypt's first female World Junior Champion. Since then American Amanda Sobhy (2010) has been the only non-Egyptian winner of the coveted junior title while the Egyptian team has claimed six of eight girls team championships.

"1993 is when the cycle started," said El Welily.

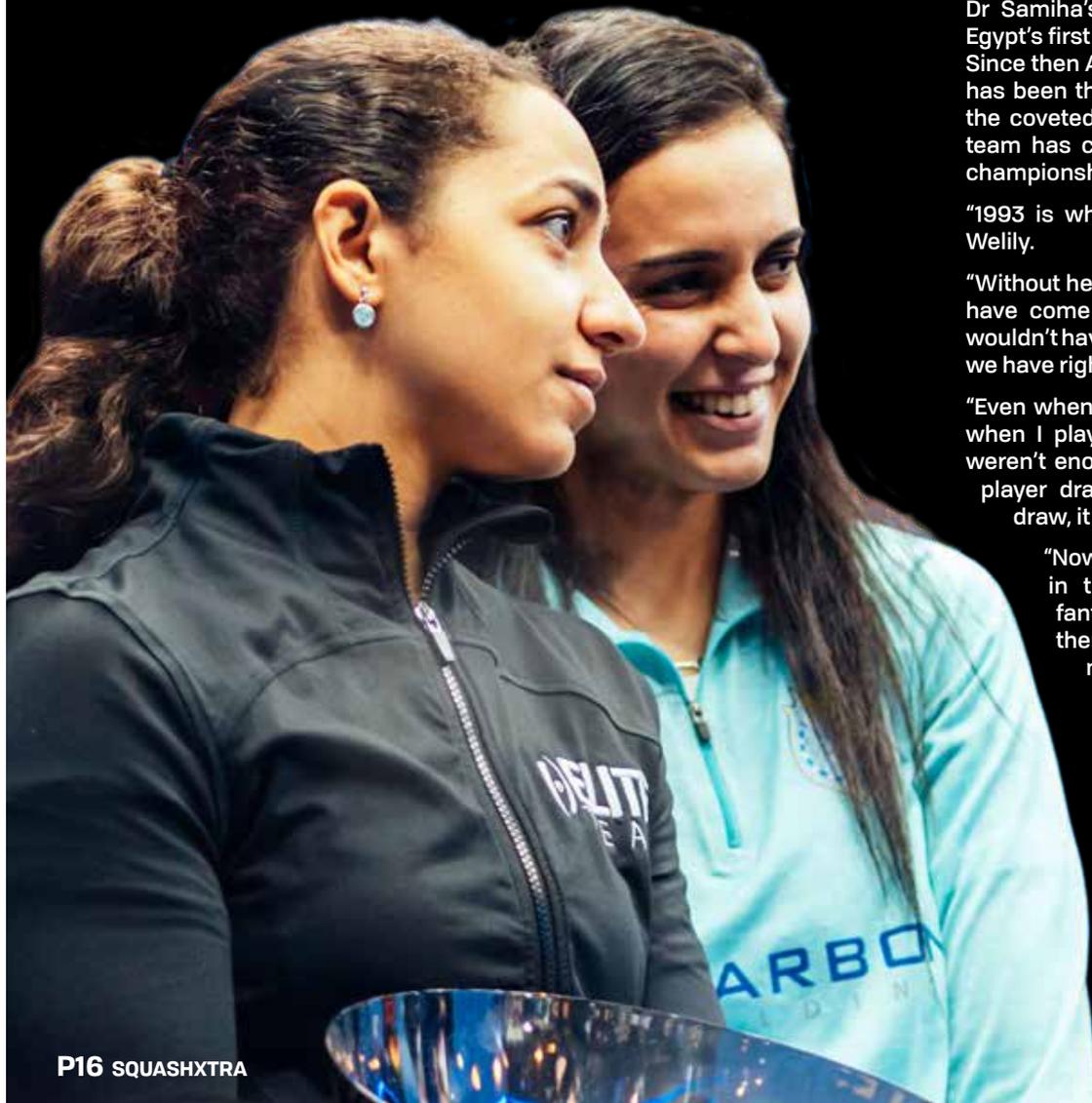
"Without her it is possible a few girls would have come through to make it - but we wouldn't have the success and the numbers we have right now.

"Even when I was young there were times when I played national events and there weren't enough girls to complete an eight player draw. When we had a 16-player draw, it was amazing.

"Now there are hundreds of players in the national events and it is fantastic to see the strength that there is in the women's game right now - which is testament to the work Dr Samiha did and how much influence she had for the game."

"That girls programme from 1993 turned into a women's programme," added Shelley.

"Salma Shabana, Engy Kheirullah and Omneya Abdel Kawy as a few key names, were the first who came through the



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juniors and became successful professional players. That would not have happened without Dr Samiha's pioneering work.

"It is unusual to be able to pinpoint success on the work of one person. Egypt had been a successful squash nation since 1930s in the men's game, but there is no doubt she was the catalyst behind the success of women's squash.

"In the mid 90s you would never have thought about Egyptian women reaching the level they are at right now. But Dr Samiha's work coincided with a time that also saw a tailing off of the sport in countries like England, Australia and Pakistan, who had enjoyed long term success.

"Al Ahram in 1996 and the success of Ahmed Barada, changed the entire status of the sport - and young girls were given a motivator in the form of Dr Samiha, and her impact is still being felt today with more and more Egyptian girls coming onto the professional scene every year."

Re-elected onto the Egyptian Federation Board in 2012 - the same year she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer - Dr Samiha once again travelled with the Egyptian team to the 2014 Women's World Team Championships, where Raneem El Welily, Nour El Sherbini, Omneya Abdel Kawy and Nour El Tayeb secured the title for Egypt.

Just two years later, in 2016, Dr Samiha lost her battle with cancer.

But while her presence is sorely missed by those who saw her impact first hand, her influence and her legacy - with the likes of Gohar, El Hammam and two-time World Junior Champion Rowan Elaraby charging towards the top of the sport - will live on for many years to come.

