

Squash Champion Nour El Sherbini On Her Rise To The Top

Nour El Sherbini, the current world champion in women's squash, took home the World Squash Championship title for the third time this year, beating fellow Egyptian player, Nour El Tayib—the world's number 3 female player—3-1 in Chicago on March 2.

El Sherbini was already making headlines after she was crowned champion of the 2019 J.P. Morgan Tournament of Champions, held in New York City in January. The young player clinched the title after a heated game with another Egyptian player, Ranim El Walily—the world's number 1 female player—from the Wadi Degla Club.

“Winning is persistence,” says 23-year-old El Sherbini, whose hard work seems to be paying off. “My goal from the start of this season is to smash the glass court.” The latest title is her third one from the J.P. Morgan Tournament and her second consecutive win. She won the tournament in 2016, 2018 and 2019, making her the first player in the world to win the championship for three seasons.

Squash is the only game where Egypt tops the global championship rankings. In 2016, seven Egyptian players dominated the top 10 best squash players' world ranking. Egyptian Mohamed El Shourbagi won the world championship in the men's division, while El Sherbini is the champion in women's section.

“Egyptian squash players didn't just top the global ranks recently, they have been doing so since the 30s,” says Amir Wageh, a squash coach and a former world champion. Egyptian player, Abd El Fattah Basha Amr, won the world championship for six years in a row from 1931 to 1937; Mahmoud Abd El Karim took the world champion title for four consecutive wins from 1947 to 1950; and Abd El Fattah AboTalip, was another three-time world champion during the 60s, Wageh notes.

Compared to sports such as football or tennis, squash is not highly lucrative, but in Egypt that is gradually changing as more young players opt to play. El Sherbini has earned a total of \$147,000 from her contract with Alexandria Sporting Club, which began in 2015. Today most top ranked players, such as El Sherbini, Ranim El Walily, Nouran Gohar, Mohamed El Shorbagi and Karim Samy, sign contracts worth more than \$30,000 in value, Wageh explains. These are much higher sums than what players used to draw. Young players today are increasingly encouraged by their parents to take on the sport, branching out from traditional avenues. El Sherbini was encouraged by her father, who accompanies her to most of her games, whether in Egypt or internationally. “We are reaping the fruit of our hard work,” says Atef El Sherbini, Nour's Father. “The biggest support we received was from her coaches who were there with her every step of the way.”

Growing up, El Sherbini's family was the only source of financial support she had. As she ascended up the career ladder in squash, financial responsibility too rose over time.

“Playing squash costs money,” says El Sherbini. Currently a member of Forbes Middle East’s 30 Under 30 class of 2019, the world squash champion now plays under the banner of Ezz Steel, the company that has sponsored her since 2014, following the end of her contract with the El Orouba Company, her sponsor from 2012 to 2013.

El Sherbini’s sponsorship amounts have also been growing. In 2018, she earned close to \$195,000 from sponsors, up from \$123,000 in 2017 and \$39,000 in 2016. El Sherbini expects her earnings from sponsorships to reach \$205,000 this year, while she has collected a total of \$477,000 in prize money throughout her career.

Squash has also started to generate significant interest from companies within Egypt. Cairo-based petrochemicals firm, Carbon Holdings, sponsor Nour El Tayeb, the current number four in the world, Rawan El Araby, who claimed the World Junior Championships, and Aly Farag, the number one in squash within the men’s division.

Squash tournaments have also started to count corporate benefactors. El Gouna International Squash Tournament, which offered a cash prize of \$330,000 during its last edition, is sponsored by billionaire Naguib Sawiris.

El Sherbini first fell in love with squash when she was just six after seeing her older brother, a former squash player, engage in the sport. As a young girl, she used to sneak out to the training room, take the racket and the ball and try to play. “I wanted to make a change,” she says.

Omar El Sherbini, her only older sibling, noticed his sister’s talent and her interest in the game. He agreed to let her join the club and train with him. “The essence of the talent lies in the ability to predict its existence before it shines,” he says.

El Sherbini surprised everyone by winning the National Squash Championship title (for those aged 11 and under) when she was just eight. There began her winning streak as a squash champion. In 2009, she played in the Women's World Junior Squash Championship under 19, in India. El Sherbini, just 13 at the time, was the youngest player. Despite her age, she beat Heba El Turk, the top ranked Egyptian player then, in the eighth round. She earned her first world title in her career after beating fellow Egyptian player, Nour El Tayeb, in the finals.

In 2011, young El Sherbini suffered a serious knee injury that nearly ruined her career in sports. “I was shocked when a doctor told me that it’s over, you won’t be playing squash again,” she remembers. Thanks to her resolute determination and persistence, along with her family’s support, El Sherbini managed to overcome this phase. She achieved full recovery after getting treated in Germany. Nine months later, she came back to the glass court once again to join the Women's World Junior Team Squash Championship in July 2012. “What took me by surprise was my qualification for the final game despite my recovery from an injury. I wasn’t very aware of its effect on my career at the time,” says El Sherbini explaining how this encouraged her to work harder.

Before her 18th birthday, she managed to regain her strength and took the fifth spot in the adult tournaments ranking by October 2012. That year, El Sherbini also won the World Junior Championship for the second time—a feat she continued in 2013. “To succeed, your desire to win has to be more than your fear of failure,” she explains.

The young star was also the recipient of the Women's World Squash Championship title

2016-2017, after beating English player Laura Massaro 3-0. El Sherbini was the youngest world squash player to win this title - something that she has managed to secure consecutively. "Keeping the title is the responsibility of winning," she says.

It is indeed an incredible feat for the player, who has mostly faced competitors older than her. Massaro, who El Sherbini competed with for the 2016 title, was 10 years older than her. She has also faced the eight-times female world champion, Nicole David—dubbed the "rock" during the semi-final of the tournament. El Sherbini has overall won nine games out of 13 against David. "I hadn't even dreamt of playing against her, let alone beating her."

Despite her passion for squash, El Sherbini has an unfulfilled dream to work in the media. A student of Media Administration at AASTMT, she intends to work on a project to introduce Egypt's squash champions to her country and spread awareness about the sport among Egyptians. "Squash is a neglected game; it doesn't receive much attention in the Egyptian media," says the star player.

El Sherbini has just finished her morning training session, but she still has a full day before she training again in the evening session. Despite losing the first world ranking to Ranim El Walily, she is determined to regain the title. "No one monopolizes success for himself, success belongs to those who pay the price," says El Sherbini. "Sport is either a daring adventure or nothing at all."

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