

VICTOR HITS THE BIG TIME



France's breakout star tells Mike Dale about his dizzyingly successful first six months in professional squash

Victor Crouin may be modest in stature but the Frenchman is growing rapidly in reputation after a stunning ascent into the world's top 10 in the second half of 2022.

After graduating from Harvard in May, Crouin embarked on a head-spinning odyssey that resulted in a gold and silver medal, a PSA World Tour Bronze title in his homeland, a debut appearance in a PSA World Tour Platinum final, plus further Tour final appearances in Cairo and Chicago.

Notice of this astounding sequence was served in March when Crouin won a second individual US College title and then stunned the sport by toppling world no.1 Paul Coll in the second round of the Canary Wharf Classic.

Squash Player caught up with the 23-year-old during a 10-hour layover en route to the New Zealand Open in November, where he was to lose to eventual champion Mohamed ElShorbagy in the semi-finals. Nursing a coffee at the airport, he looked back over his short, chaotic journey as a professional thus far with a mix of glee and semi-disbelief.

It began after Harvard's 'senior week' - the post-exams period of partying and celebration. He flew back to his hometown of Toulon, not far along the French Riviera from Marseille, and trained with his father and coach, Emmanuel, solidly for three weeks.

His first stop was Qatar for a \$30k event in which he won a tight final against Mexico's Leonel Cardenas, followed by Alabama for July's World Games. "My goal was just to get a medal," he admits, "but I was thinking more bronze than gold." He backed up a 68-minute semi-final win over Miguel Rodriguez with a five-setter against compatriot Gregoire Marche in the final. "I saw the opportunity and I took it. A gold medal at my first World Games - it was quite amazing," he said.

A silver at the European Individual Championships followed, then a return trip to Qatar which, in his words, "took things to another dimension."

At the Platinum Q-Terminals Classic, he reeled off victories over Joel Makin, Patrick Rooney, giant-killer Abdulla Al-Tamimi and former world champion Tarek Momen, but admitted the final against Mohamed ElShorbagy was a step too far: "I kind of realised what was

happening and it was tough to handle all the pressure.”

He flew to Nantes and barely had time to unpack before he was on court again at the extraordinary Hangar 24 venue, where he romped through the draw to face the younger ElShorbagy brother, Marwan, in an epic final which he took 12-10 in the fifth.

“Everything was going so fast,” he remembers, “but there’s no doubt winning in Nantes was the best moment of my life so far.

“I had no recovery time after Qatar at all. Each day in Nantes I thought, ‘I’ll go out today’, but I survived all the way and the final was just fantastic. It took me a while afterwards to understand what had happened. It was nice to go home again and train quietly with my dad.”

Emmanuel, an architect turned squash coach, divorced from Victor’s optometrist mother Helene before the pandemic. Victor has a twin sister who is studying medicine and a younger sister who is training as a dancer in Paris.

Growing up, the Crouin household was very academic. Victor was ferried to tennis, squash and piano lessons before going to the boarding school linked to the French national squash centre in Aix-en-Provence, where he trained with Gregory Gaultier, Mathieu Castagnet, Gregoire Marche and Sebastien Bonmalais.

He modestly describes his game as “quite basic” and befitting of his “risk-averse” personality, but occasionally likes to throw in a “surprising” attacking shot. “I like the physical side of the game,” he says. “I’m small but I move well and I don’t mind playing for long periods.

“I’ve always had to be smarter on the squash court because of my size. In juniors, my opponents were hitting the ball super hard and before I developed that power myself, I had to work out

different ways of getting the ball past my opponents.”

Crouin’s parents wouldn’t allow him to turn pro after high school, so he accepted an offer from Harvard, following in the footsteps of alumni Ali Farag and Amanda Sobhy and joining Gina Kennedy under the wing of legendary coach Mike Way in Boston. He studied economics, maths and history but spent most of his time on the squash courts.

“Harvard redefined my life in ways I never could have believed,” he says. “It’s an experience that’s difficult to explain. In US colleges, you really belong to that school, even after you’ve graduated. It gives you a big, diverse and important network for the rest of your life. Any time I go to the States I know I’ve got a second family. I went back after the US Open, and it felt like home.”

Whilst his peers mixed squash training with studying and partying, it was only really squash which interested Crouin. “I just wanted to be a professional. Every day at the courts it was in my mind to be the best version of myself so I would improve and the team would win the championship.”

Crouin, world no.10 at time of writing, retains a strong love and affiliation for the ‘Crimson’ (Harvard’s team colours). Whilst there, he was unanimously selected as the Ivy League Player of the Year and led them to three straight National titles.

Crouin speaks glowingly of Way, Harvard’s coach for over a decade, who led Jonathon Power to the 1998 world title: “I can’t say he is as big an influence as my dad, but Mike helped me so much and I think of him as a mentor. He is always very chilled out. He made me realise being part of a team is hugely important and that it’s not all about me.

“There has always been a barrier between me and my dad as a coach. He’s my dad,

so sometimes it was difficult for me to accept some of the things he tried to tell me. Having Mike repeat the same things helped me realise that my dad was right and I should put my ego away.

“I’m not saying my parents didn’t educate me well; they did of course, but Mike definitely gave me a new perspective on life.”

Emmanuel retained an influence over his son’s development, even while he was at Harvard. “We log my training on a shared document and I continued to update it with what I was doing in Boston, so he always had oversight and input,” Crouin reveals. “I would film my solo ghosting sessions, send him the footage and he would suggest adjustments.”

Post-college, Crouin now lives with his father back in Toulon. (“I haven’t been home for longer than two weeks – we can go that long without arguing!”). Victor’s childhood squash club has closed, so Emmanuel works nights in a hotel at the weekends and coaches Victor and junior players at a different club during the week.

Together, father and son are focused on some big but obvious targets. “I want to remain in the top 10 and ideally reach the top eight before the end of the season so I will to have a protected seeding. I haven’t set any other goals, except to be world no.1 one day – of course!”

Victor Crouin has played with the Dunlop Sonic Core Revelation Pro Lite for the last two years. “I love the power and manoeuvrability I get with the head-light 125g Pro Lite,” he said. “For me, it has the perfect balance.”

The Frenchman has been sponsored by Dunlop for over a decade. “I’ve always stayed loyal because they have been great to me,” he added.

