

Sweat | 92 Years Old, and Still Ruling The Squash Court
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Todd Heisler/The New York Times Victor Elmaleh, who has dedicated much of his life to squash, playing at the Yale Club. He often invites top athletes to take him on.

Work it Out

Sweat is a biweekly series about sports.

They are well-heeled warriors. These squash players do battle behind thick glass at the courts of the Yale Club, in Midtown Manhattan, backed by a soundtrack of roars and grunts and lunging bodies slamming against walls.

On a recent weekday, one of the liveliest contests was on Court 2, where an older man was running a much younger player ragged and whipping him in a succession of games. The younger man was soaked with sweat and heaving from exhaustion. The older was calmly holding position on the right side of the court, moving in a radius of a few steps and flicking returns all over the court. Both were going for the jugular, their intensity punctuated by brief moments of civility between points.

The matchup: Victor Elmaleh, 92, versus Conor O'Malley, 31.

In one game, Mr. Elmaleh, a longtime competitive squash player, was losing 13-9, but came back to win the game in a tiebreaker, 16-4. He took the next game as well, 15-9.



Todd Heisler/The New York Times Victor Elmaleh

But Mr. O'Malley is no pushover. A former college player and professional teacher, he now coordinates events for U.S. Squash, the national governing body and membership organization, and runs its team. And it would be wrong to assume he was letting the old man win a few.

"We're both very competitive out there, and he doesn't take it easy on me and I don't take it easy on him," Mr. O'Malley said. "I'm trying to beat him. I'm sweating as much as when I'm playing with any other player."

Mr. Elmaleh, chairman of the real estate development firm World-Wide Group, was born in Morocco in 1918 and grew up in Brooklyn. Living in Bensonhurst during the Great Depression, he played all the usual street games – stickball, stoopball, punchball, boxball. But handball grabbed his attention, and he honed his game on the courts in Gravesend, Borough Park and Manhattan Beach. He won a national doubles championship in 1951 and was a national runner-up in singles. But soon after, he was introduced to squash at the City Athletic Club, and never went back.

Mr. Elmaleh has dedicated much of his life to the game. In 2001, he won the Casino Heights Pro-Am tournament in doubles in Brooklyn with Gary Waite, then the top-ranked player in the world. Mr. Elmaleh also won the 1968 national squash doubles championships in St. Louis at age 49, with the squash legend Victor Niederhoffer, who was 23. At the time, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch published an article with the headline: "49 Too Old for Squash? Don't Tell Vic Elmaleh."

He laughed when he pointed out the headline recently. "Good thing no one ever told me," he said.

Many once-top athletes face the problem of how to compete with intensity as they age. Mr. Elmaleh has found a way. Through his longtime affiliation with great players, he invites top athletes to take him on. (As a wealthy developer who helps finance major squash organizations, he does have a certain level of access.) Then he gets them to agree to a couple of rule amendments.

Mr. Elmaleh's legs are "shot," he said, giving him limited mobility. So, in their match, Mr. O'Malley spots him one main concession: He must hit the ball so it bounces in the quadrant of the court where Mr. Elmaleh remains. A top player can work within those parameters and hit hard, well-placed shots to challenge Mr. Elmaleh.

"The better the player – and I mean world-class players – the better the game," Mr. Elmaleh said. Another nuance is that they use a doubles ball, which has more bounce than one used in singles play. This prevents him from having to lunge to chase dying shots.

After that, it's on. Mr. Elmaleh does not need any more charity. His eyes are sharp, and he still has the old snap with the whippy squash racket.

"I don't care how hard they hit, because I can hit most of them back," he said. "And if they go by me, I hit them off the back wall."

"Everything depends on my being more patient," Mr. Elmaleh added, "and they generally get impatient and make a mistake. Maybe it's just a matter of, it's the only thing I have left."