

# Gentleman, Scholar, Coach: The Reformation of James Willstrop

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*By Nathan Clarke*

In a sport where youthful exuberance often burns fast and bright, James Willstrop has defied expectations. At 41, most elite athletes have either retreated from the stage or been pushed off by younger, faster talents.

But Willstrop – an eloquent, thoughtful artisan of squash – occupies a unique space: his dual role, still competing on the professional circuit while simultaneously coaching at the highest level, is a reflection of his deep understanding of the game, its nuances, and the humanity it reveals.

Roles that for Willstrop are complementary, part of an evolving understanding of what it means to play and teach squash at the highest level – for Willstrop is no ordinary coach, this is a man who has a deeply entrenched passion for squash.

To understand Willstrop as a coach, one must first understand his view of squash. He approaches the game with the kind of intellectualism and artistry that elevates it beyond sport – for his belief is that squash is more than sport – it is art.

And like all great art, it's about respect, discipline, and emotion.

“It's not just about winning,” Willstrop says. “It's about how you play the game. You can be a great player, but if you don't have respect – for yourself, for your opponent, for the game – then none of it matters.”



For Willstrop, squash has never been just a sport. It's a medium through which players express themselves, engage in psychological battles, and create a unique form of theatre.

“Squash is just so theatrical,” he explains. “There’s intimacy in the way you play it, in the way it’s staged. You can’t get that kind of experience anywhere else. Squash, to me, is more than just sport – it’s art, it’s performance.”

Willstrop’s approach to playing the game reflects this belief. His movement on the court is elegant, his shot selection thoughtful. He builds rallies like a narrative, creating tension, escalating the drama, and finding moments to resolve it with a perfect touch or a daring drop.

“It’s a battle, yes, but it’s also a story that unfolds between two people. That’s what makes squash so special. It’s intimate, it’s dramatic. You can’t hide on that court, and the crowd feels everything.”

This understanding of squash as a medium for expression, rather than simply competition, has shaped the way Willstrop coaches. He doesn’t impose a rigid system on his players but helps them discover their own voice, their own style of play.

“Every player has their own story, their own way of playing,” he says. “As a coach, my job is to help them tell that story, to guide them to the best version of themselves.”

Willstrop’s transition into coaching wasn’t so much a conscious decision as it was an organic evolution. After the death of his father, Malcolm Willstrop, himself a legendary squash coach, James naturally stepped into the role of mentor at Pontefract Squash Club, the training ground that shaped his own career.

Malcolm was renowned for his unconventional coaching methods, emphasising the mental and psychological aspects of the game as much as the physical. His influence on James is undeniable, but James has also forged his own path, blending his father’s wisdom with his own experiences at the top level of the sport

“Malcolm was the most understanding person I know,” James recalls. “My dad could see the bigger picture, he was massively perceptive.

“He knew that it wasn’t just about what happened on the court – it was about the travel, the personal issues, the state of your mind.

“He wasn’t just coaching squash players; he was coaching people, and that’s what made him great. He had this brilliant ability to know when to push you and when to let you rest.

“I’ve learned so much from my dad, but I’ve also added my own layers,” he says. “Most of the stuff is psychology. It’s understanding the difference between players and how they think, what motivates them, what scares them – helping players understand how their thoughts and emotions affect their game.”

That understanding forms the foundation of James’s own coaching philosophy today.

One of Willstrop's most intriguing coaching endeavours is his work with Egyptian sensation Mostafa Asal. At just 23, Asal has already achieved remarkable success, but his career has been marred by controversies, including multiple suspensions for on-court conduct.



His undeniable talent was tempered by a volatile reputation – until he sought out Willstrop – a coach whose entire ethos revolved around respect, discipline, and fairness – as a surprise mentor.

“When Mostafa came to me, I wasn’t sure what to expect because he needed drastic action,” Willstrop states matter-of-factly.

“I wasn’t expecting it, but I could see why he wanted to work with me. I’m extreme about these things. I don’t tolerate bad behaviour.

“I told him from the beginning, if you don’t respect the game, I can’t work with you. It’s that simple. You have to play the right way. Otherwise, it doesn’t mean anything.”

Willstrop admits his first few sessions with Asal were eye-opening, revealing not only the immense talent that had already made Asal a star but also the cultural and stylistic differences that had contributed to the controversies surrounding him.

“When Mostafa first came to me, I quickly realised that a lot of the problems stemmed from how he had been taught to play from a young age,” Willstrop says. “There is a win-at-all-costs mentality in some training environments, especially in Egypt, that can encourage behaviours on the court that wouldn’t be acceptable elsewhere.

“It was clear that he needed a reset on how he approached the game, especially in terms of his movement and his respect for opponents.”

“But it wasn’t just about telling him what he was doing wrong. It was about getting him to understand why it was problematic,” Willstrop explains. “He was so used to playing a certain way that it wasn’t just a technical adjustment – it was a mental one.

“He had to relearn how to approach situations on the court.

“I told him from the start that if he didn’t change the way he moved on the court, he wouldn’t be able to reach his full potential,” Willstrop recalls. “He was receptive, which is the most important thing. He knew something had to change, and he was willing to listen.”



This receptiveness allowed them to begin working on improving Asal's awareness during matches, ensuring that his powerful play did not cross the line into obstruction or excessive physicality.

"He's got so much talent, but there were a lot of rough edges," continues Willstrop.

"But champions have this ability to open their minds, to listen. That's what Mostafa has done. He's taken everything on board and he was understanding that there is a very rigid limit to what I'll tolerate."

The partnership between Willstrop and Asal draws inevitable comparisons to the relationship between boxing legend Cus D'Amato and Mike Tyson. Like Tyson, Asal is a prodigy – a player capable of brilliance but often undone by his own emotions.

D'Amato's genius lay in his ability to channel that power, teaching Tyson how to control his aggression and use it to dominate the boxing ring.

Willstrop's role, much like D'Amato's, has been to guide Asal not just as a player but as a person.

“It's not about changing who he is,” Willstrop says. “He's got this incredible personality, this fire – I don't want to take that away. That's what makes him special.

“But I want him to channel it the right way, to use it as a strength rather than a weakness.

“With someone like Mostafa, it's not about teaching him how to hit the ball. He already knows how to do that. It's about getting him to understand his emotions, to control them so they work for him, not against him.”

Under Willstrop's guidance, Asal has undergone nothing short of a transformation – with even the most ardent ‘anti-Asal’ forum warriors changing their tune in a matter of months.

While still maintaining his aggressive, high-energy style, he has become more composed and focused on the court.

“Mostafa is still Mostafa,” Willstrop explains. “He's got that spark, that edge. But now he's learning how to control it, how to use it when it matters.”

Asal's progression has been clear. He's climbed the rankings and secured several significant victories under Willstrop's mentorship – namely the British Open and Paris Open – but for James, the true victory lies in the evolution of Asal's mindset.

Despite the huge strides taken, Willstrop says that there's still a lot of work to be done in the journey ahead with Asal.

“He's not just playing better, he's thinking better. That's what's going to make him great. But it's still a process. Mostafa isn't there yet – he's still a long way from the finished article – but he's getting there. And when he does, he has the potential to be unstoppable.”

Willstrop's influence on Asal extends beyond tactics and shot selection. It touches on something far more fundamental: how to handle both victory and defeat with grace.

“Squash is a game of emotions,” Willstrop explains. “You're in this confined space, battling one-on-one with someone else. It's intense. But how you manage those emotions is what separates the good players from the great ones.”



Those emotions are ones that Willstrop has experienced all too often first hand – for in many ways, Willstrop’s own career exemplifies his entire philosophy.

As a player, he was known for his sportsmanship and calm demeanour, even in the face of crushing defeats. For him, respect isn’t just about adhering to the rules or maintaining a good public image – it’s about honouring the game, your opponent, and yourself.



“I’ve had my moments where I’ve lost it on court,” he admits. “But I learned over time that you gain nothing from letting your emotions control you. If anything, it makes you worse.

“That’s what I try to teach the players I coach. Keep your head, no matter what happens. You’re never going to win every match, but you can always play the right way.

“It’s the first conversation I have with any player. If you don’t respect the game, I can’t work with you. It’s that simple.

“I tell the players I work with that I don’t care if they lose, as long as they lose the right way. Play with respect for your opponent, for the game, and for yourself. That’s what matters.”

What sets Willstrop apart as a coach is his ability to work across the spectrum of talent and experience. While he is enjoying success working with some of the world’s best players like Asal, you’re just as likely to find Willstrop on court with beginners just starting their squash journey.

But no matter who he is on court with, his approach remains consistent: a commitment to helping each player discover their own identity on the court while emphasising the importance of respect, discipline, and intellectual curiosity.

“Working with kids teaches you patience,” Willstrop says with a smile. “They don’t have the same focus as a professional athlete, obviously, but they’re just as passionate in their own way. And that passion is what you have to tap into.”

For Willstrop, coaching beginners is not about pushing them toward elite competition, but about fostering a lifelong love for the game and with his own kids taking their first steps onto the squash court, Willstrop emphasises the importance of letting them lead the way.

“Not every kid I coach is going to become a professional player, and that’s fine. For kids, the most important thing is to have fun and develop a love for the game,” Willstrop says.

“I think kids should be allowed to enjoy squash on their own terms. It’s about developing a passion for the sport and building a connection to it, rather than worrying about results at such a young age.

“With my boys, I want them to enjoy squash for themselves, not because I was a player or because they feel they have to follow in my footsteps. I want them to play it for their own enjoyment because that’s what will keep them playing for life – and that is just as, if not more important, than coaching someone who is winning titles at the very top level.

“I believe this is a game that can guide you through life, teach you fundamental principles that apply across all of life, and offer people something constant. The key is to keep it fun, keep it varied. Training shouldn’t feel like a job to a young kid. The love for the game has

to come first.”



This adaptability is what makes Willstrop a unique coach. He tailors his methods to suit the needs of each player, ensuring that they develop at their own pace while fostering a deep connection to the sport.

Willstrop’s ability to switch seamlessly between coaching elite players and grassroots development is a testament to his versatility and deep understanding of the sport.

“You learn so much from coaching kids,” he reflects. “They teach you patience, they remind

you of the joy of learning something new. And that helps me when I'm working with top-level players as well.

"It keeps me grounded, keeps me focused on what really matters."

Yet even as Willstrop carves out his role as one of squash's top coaches, he remains a fierce competitor on the professional circuit himself.

At an age when most of his contemporaries have long since retired, Willstrop continues to compete at a high level, regularly taking on – and sometimes defeating – players half his age.

"I don't know why I keep doing it," Willstrop laughs. "There are times when I think, 'Why am I putting myself through this?' But then I step on the court, and I remember why.

"It's the love of the game, the thrill of competition. I don't care about winning as much as I used to. I just enjoy the process, the challenge. I still love the competition. The thrill of testing yourself, of seeing if you can still do it against the younger guys – it's something I can't walk away from just yet."

Willstrop's longevity is a reflection of his deep connection to squash and his willingness to adapt his game to suit his body's changing needs.

"I can't train the way I used to," he admits. "I don't have the same physical capabilities as I did when I was in my 20s.

"But what I've lost in physicality, I've gained in experience and understanding. I'm smarter about how I play now, and that allows me to compete at a high enough level even though I'm older.

"There's something special about being able to play the game you love at a high level, even when people expect you to be done," he says. "I think it shows that with the right mindset, you can achieve longevity in any sport. It's about evolving, adapting, and keeping your passion alive.

"But also when you're still playing, you have a firsthand understanding of what the players are experiencing – the pressure, the nerves, the physicality," he continues. "It helps me relate to my players and gives me a different kind of credibility as a coach."



As Willstrop continues to guide the next generation of squash talent, his influence on the sport is undeniable.

“Squash has given me so much over the years,” he reflects. “It’s taught me about resilience, about how to handle success and failure, about how to push myself beyond what I thought was possible.

“But most importantly, it’s taught me about respect and that’s what I try to pass on to the players I coach.

“I want my players to be successful, of course. But more than that, I want them to be good people, to approach the game with integrity, and to understand that how you win is just as important as winning itself.

“Coaching is about helping players unlock their potential, but it’s also about helping them see beyond the game,” he explains. “Squash is just one part of their lives, but the lessons they learn here can shape who they become.”

As he looks toward the future, Willstrop remains committed to the sport that has defined his life. Whether he’s competing on the court or mentoring from the sidelines, his passion for squash – and for teaching its values – continues to burn as brightly as ever.

“I don’t know how long I’ll keep playing,” Willstrop says with a grin. “But as long as I love it, as long as I feel like I’m contributing to the game, I’ll keep going. And when the time comes to hang up my racket, I know I’ll still be involved in the sport – because it’s given me so much, and I want to keep giving back.”

In the end, James Willstrop’s legacy won’t just be measured in the number of titles he’s won or the players he’s coached to greatness. It will be defined by the way he has lived the game – with elegance, intellect, and an unwavering commitment to doing things the right way.

And in that, he is truly a gentleman, scholar, and coach.