The old man of squash is hip again

He once moved with the speed of a striking leopard, electrifying spectators with an agility that seemed to transcend human limits. He was the greatest player in the world, whose fanatical training regime earned him the title of finest man on earth. Almost single-handedly, Jonah Barrington transformed squash into a British national sport in the 1960s and 1970s.

The effect was more than flush and blood could stand. His Achillies tendons went first, snapping like a pistol shot. Although lame in the left leg, he persevered until the artificial pain in his hips broke him to a grinding halt. Happening and sustained by painkillers, he became embarrassed to be seen in public. The old leopard, it seemed, would never hunt again.

However, his dream of casting his way back has been realised. Just over a week ago Barrington, now 58, competing against his top-class players in the world masters championships at Sheffield, it was the first step of his comeback after an 11-year absence from competitive play.

He owes his miraculous recovery to a revolution in the sport’s hip replacement. "The basic principle of the operation was never improved measurably," he said. "I am so grateful that I can again play a sport that is dear to my heart. It’s fantastic, but it’s very early days in the process of rehabilitation."

Astonishingly, Barrington had the operation only 18 months ago. Unlike a normal hip replacement, in which a long rod is inserted into the leg bone, a short-stemmed metal universal joint is fixed to the femur with cement and secured in the hip socket by synthetic bone, into which surrounding bone grows. The ball and socket are lubricated by the hip’s natural fluids.

"In the past one would be told that running or playing squash would lead to an early wearing out of a hip replacement," he said.

"But my surgeon believes that vigorous impact work — meaning the leg hitting the ground — actually prolongs the hip’s life and improves the bone density."

"What made the procedure even more unusual was that Barrington had an Achilles operation on the same day; the tendon was rebuilt with a graft from his leg. This was more problematical, since his calf muscles had shrivelled during 10 years of inactivity."

"His appearance in the world masters was therefore a testament to his leg surgery, his hip surgery, his ‘I don’t think the surgeon really knew what I was doing,’ he laughed. ‘I had to do an enormous amount of leg exercises and stretching. I had to learn how to use my left leg with confidence and strength, which is one of the simple processes people might not think of. I had to sort out a whole succession of jobs, including a milk round, teaching, washing dishes and as a model for art students."

Three years after taking up the sport again, Barrington owns an amateur squash championship and a doubles tournament sponsored by a British firm. His philosophy is uncompromising. "I believe, if one sets out to be the best in the world at something, one can make oneself do it," he said.

"I don’t think my surgeon was a man of great sophistication, but he has trained me to be a bit of a sportsman."

He has fought shy of a standard hip operation after an unsuccessful hip replacement endured by his wife, Madeleine, a former athlete who has lived in Gloucester, Somerset. Fortunately, he waited for science to come up with something new. In 1987 he read a newspaper article about a hip replacement pioneered by Dr Derek McMillan at the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital in Birmingham. "Up to then, not one specialist had suggested it might be possible for me to run again. The most anybody could say was that I might play some social tennis."

"My hope is to run again."

He acknowledges the implications of such implants for sport, which conjure up images of bionic athletes with enhanced powers. Surgeons already promote new Achilles tendons superior to the originals. Where to place the line, he wonders? "One assumes that, with the knowledge people have now, they are actually going to use substances and perhaps have operations. Is it fair to have a bionic knee? But it is common knowledge that, after a woman has had a baby, she will perform better in aerobic activity. What should be legal and illegal?"

"If he had known as a youngster what he knows now, he would have done it differently, he admits. He means the modern cross-training techniques, which ensure that joints and muscles are not worn prematurely. But he has not announced his belief that sports training is like preparing for war."

"I don’t think I would have trained the way I did then. I believe that, if you want to come out at the top end of very arduous sports, there are periods when you are going to be straining and that will be damaging in some way. If you are not prepared to accept those phases, you are simply not going to be good enough."

Stuart Wavell