



Leopard on the prowl: Jonah Barrington in his competitive prime

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 fittest man on earth. Almost single-handedly, Jonah Barrington transformed squash into a British national sport in the 1960s and 1970s.

The effort was more than flesh and blood could stand. His Achilles tendon went first, snapping like a pistol shot. Although lame in the left leg, he persevered until the arthritic pain in his hips brought him to a grinding halt. Hobbled 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 clawing his way back has been realised. Just over a week ago Barrington, now 58, was competing against 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 revolutionary advance on the standard hip replacement. "The quality of my life has improved immeasurably," 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 thigh. 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 legendary fitness training. "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 relearn how to use my left leg with confidence and relearn the game, which is not the simple process people might think. When your reflexes haven't worked for a decade, it doesn't happen in a day, especially as the ball goes faster through the air due to improved technology."

He was disappointed to be knocked out of the singles (he reached the semi-finals in the over-55s doubles), but by no means discouraged. The beauty of the hip operation is that he can

expect continuing improvement over the next two years, by which time the next world masters will be looming. "That is very inviting. But my wife would prefer me to let things happen a little more sensibly."

Barrington once confessed to a "deep, almost maniacal hatred of being beaten". The same indomitable spirit nourished his hopes of regaining mobility. "Many people very sensibly think of taking it easy as they get older, but I didn't. I have always been hooked on sport and particularly squash. It's not a case of living in the past, but of testing oneself. I have always enjoyed the test."

He has spent much of his life hammering his personal anvil. A Cornishman of Irish and Welsh descent, he showed academic promise at Cheltenham College but Trinity College, Dublin, noticed that he was "infrequently sober" and insisted that he abandon his law studies. To pursue his daily four-hour training sessions for squash, he took a succession of jobs, including a milk round, teaching, washing dishes and as a model for art students.

Three years after taking up the game seriously in 1964, he won the open and amateur squash championships, a double never previously achieved by a Briton. His philosophy was uncompromising. "I believe that, if one sets out to be the best in the world at something, one can make oneself do it," he said. Some doubted his insistence that he was not a masochist after he adopted the "pain barrier" techniques of Herb Elliott, the mile record-breaker. A typical day's

training included 600 press-ups and an equal number of sit-ups.

His inspiring example — he won the British open championship six times — is credited with changing squash in Britain from a middle-class, minority sport into a fashionable game that produced winners. He became an off-court force behind the British squash teams, as director of excellence and then president of the Squash Rackets Association, which he remains.

His self-esteem plummeted with the loss of mobility after his Achilles tendon snapped in 1987. "There came a moment when the arthritic pain did not go away, but increased and increased, presenting a sleeping problem. I was still immersed in coaching, but I found I couldn't play pupils, which is the best way of discovering how their minds work. Increasingly I had difficulty in winding myself up for the day's activities. It involved an awful lot of painkillers before I could set a foot on court."

Incredibly, he continued to hop around right up to the operation. "In the past half-year I found it more difficult to travel and it became embarrassing to be seen limping so badly. I became reluctant to appear in public."

He had fought shy of a standard hip operation after an unsuccessful hip replacement endured by his wife, Madeleine, a former athlete with whom he lives in Glastonbury, Somerset. Forlornly, he waited for science to come up with something new. In 1997 he read a newspaper article about a high-tech solution pioneered by Dr Derek McMinn at the Royal Orthopaedic hospital in Birming-

ham. "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. Whereas Dr McMinn, from the moment we met, seemed thrilled at the idea that I might twist and turn on the squash court again."

He acknowledges the implications of such implants for sport, which conjure up images of bionic athletes with enhanced powers. Surgeons already promise new Achilles tendons superior to the originals. Where to draw the line, he wonders? "One assumes that, with the knowledge that 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. So 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 renounced his belief that sports training is like preparing for war.

"I don't think I would have trained less intensively. I still 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