

YONEX ALL ENGLAND BADMINTON CHAMPIONSHIPS

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Ouseph leads youthful charge

Expect a hard, intense game this week, says Rod Gilmour

Birmingham will be awash with fast, frenetic and vociferous action this week. The Yonex All England Championships take place at the National Indoor Arena, while on the outskirts of the city it's Crufts, the annual dog jamboree.

The world's best in show, though, will be found at the badminton. The Chinese, who won all five events in 2009, will be omnipresent, and the Danes threaten. Meanwhile, England's youthful crop of burgeoning talent continues to grow. Where once we relied on Nathan Robertson and Gail Emms for success at doubles, home-based players are also blossoming in the singles.

Rajiv Ouseph is one such leading light ahead of London 2012, the 24-year-old benefiting from Badminton England's raft of changes after Kenneth Jonassen started his role as men's singles coach last July.

Ouseph won the US Open in Los Angeles, his biggest tournament win, the same week as the Dane, who retired in 2008, moved to Badminton England's headquarters. The Briton is now hammering on the door of the world's top 10 after a leap-bounding 18 months.

"He has completely changed how we're training," the world No 14 says of Jonassen. "He has upped my level of intensity and has tried to make me more aggressive and harder to play."

"This year is vital with the Olympics looming. But, hopefully, I can still be competing at my current level and continue to play like I did towards the end of last year."



Coach class: the way Rajiv Ouseph trains has been transformed by Kenneth Jonassen

Olympic countdown

Adrian Christy, Badminton England's chief executive, believes the All England Championships will boost the sport's profile over the next two years.

Badminton's oldest tournament was rewarded for its popularity with the players with top-tier status following a revamp of the tired Super Series format.

Last May, the Badminton World Federation announced that the All England would join the

Korea, Indonesia, Denmark and China Opens as one of five events comprising a new Premier Series, effectively the first grand slam.

Christy said: "It will give us a real impetus in the countdown to the World Championships in August and the Olympic Games in 2012."

"To be among the Premier five events reflects our tournament's prestigious position in the eyes of the badminton world, and we look forward to seeing the

best players from across the globe here this week."

Over the next three years, All England's prize purse will equate to \$1.1 million while Badminton England believes the new format will benefit the sport in the UK and the Super Series' global status.

Locog, London 2012's organisers, announced last month that the World Championships will be used as a test event ahead of the Olympics.

Included in that run were two defeats to world No 1 Lee Chong Wei, Malaysia's billboard star: first, in the early rounds of the World Championships in Paris, then a one-sided Commonwealth Games final last October. Full of attack, the 26-minute defeat in Delhi left Ouseph looking at the positives.

"Playing him is another level up as he has the complete game, but I'm better for it," Ouseph says.

At 6ft 3in, Ouseph looks languid and relaxed on court, but it is his touch and lightning speed that sets him apart - attributes his coach is keen to bolster.

"I want him to feel that his opponents know he's there in their faces," Jonassen says.

Ouseph will have to call on his new-found experiences as early as the first round, thanks to an unkind draw which pits him against the world champion, Chen Jin.

The London-born right-hander believes home advantage will be key. "We don't play that many tournaments at home, but with all the top countries playing it means a lot."

Ouseph is not the only Briton who is making headway in the upper echelons of the sport. Step forward Jenny Wallwork, Robertson's new mixed partner, Gabby White and Chris Adcock, three doubles players in their early twenties and all bubbling with boisterous enthusiasm.

"All the players are believing in the coaches," adds Jonassen. "We can take them somewhere but we can't do the work. But there's definitely the talent and they are hungry for improvement."

Unlike Crufts, Ouseph's path to glory will be no walk in the park. You can find out for yourselves this week. A word of warning though: with the skill levels on offer, you will hatch plans to buy tickets for the Olympics thereafter.

Team facts

All England has come a long way since...

The first Championships on April 4, 1899. Two officials spent all day weighing, trimming and strengthening the barrel shuttles, which were never of equal size.

Brit to watch

Yorkshire's Jenny Wallwork has made the transition seamless after taking over from Gail Emms



as Nathan Robertson's mixed partner in 2008. Feisty, the 24-year-old captured Commonwealth silver with Robertson and the pair have climbed to world No 8.

International stars to watch

Lee Chong Wei, of Malaysia, finally broke China's stranglehold in men's singles when he beat Japan's 20-year-old Kenichi Tago. Chong Wei realised the meaning of victory when he received a phone call of congratulations from Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. Olympic champion Lin Dan, China's answer to David Beckham, will be looking to add to his four titles won since 2004.

British representation (England unless stated)

Men's singles: Rajiv Ouseph, Carl Baxter (starts qualifying today).

Women's singles: Susan Egelstaff (Scotland), Elizabeth Cann.

Men's doubles: Marcus Ellis and Peter Mills, Chris Adcock and Andrew Ellis.

Women's doubles: Jenny Wallwork and Gabby White, Heather Olver and Mariana Agathangelou.

Mixed doubles: Nathan Robertson and Jenny Wallwork, Adcock and Imogen Bankier (Scotland), Robert Blair (Scotland) and White.

What they say

"This is the Wimbledon of badminton. It has the history and a hint of the old days." Jan Jorgensen, world No 12, Denmark.

For the latest information on the Yonex All England Badminton Championships, visit www.allenglandbadminton.com

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