

# RIDING HIGH

## Mark's up, up and away



**MERVYN COLLINS** meets British squash No 1 Mark Cairns

GRAND Central Station, The Galleria shopping complex and the middle of the desert – just some of the strange places that Mark Cairns has displayed his rich array of squash strokes.

Such is the entrepreneurial expertise of current people associated with the game, the sport is showing an immense upward surge in popularity. So, where does that leave Abingdon's British champion and world No 12?

"You can take a squash court just about anywhere," Cairns declared. "It's run very professionally and the responsible way in which people act can only improve the game."

"Innovation and technology have obviously benefited squash as a spectator sport and if you invest enough money to get results, then the sport will leap forward."

Cairns is a member of the Professional Squash Association and revealed that plans are afoot to introduce a coloured ball – made bigger by the use of chrono-photography – to make it easier for fans and armchair viewers to witness the action.

"We get reasonable coverage from the television companies who are just begging for more sports to cover. It's shown live in the Far East, but it's yet to make a real impact in this country," said Cairns.

Jonah Barrington's name is perhaps the only one synonymous with the sport, but Oxon's top player has every right to be labelled on the same level as the county's superstar, Tim Henman.

Cairns is the reigning British champion and last month captured the inaugural world doubles championship in partnership with English No 1 Chris Walker.

Ranked five in England, Cairns reckons he is now at his peak.

"I'm playing as well as I've ever played," the 30-year-old admitted. "I'm a fairly wise bloke and I've learnt a lot on the circuit."

"England have great strength in



depth and we could play any country in the world in a three-match series and we would win."

This increased yearning for national success is reflected around the country where all the leagues are becoming stronger.

"There's a real buzz about playing at

local league level," Cairns admits. "The Oxfordshire League is a real hard struggle with Abingdon, Wallingford and Thame all vying for honours."

Thame boast the British ladies champion – Sue Wright from Aylesbury – in their ranks, while Wallingford can call upon the

services of England No 7 Stephen Meads.

A former pupil at Fitzharry's in the town, Cairns only took up squash because "it wasn't as cold as other sports" and embarked on his career at the age of 11.

Fitzharry's brought Cairns 11 'O' levels and three 'A' levels, but also hindered his on-court progress. He then made the decision to give it a real go, but it wasn't until early 1994 that the self-confessed late starter began to make it big when he reached the last eight of the British Open, beating star player Rodney Martin on the way.

And Cairns hasn't looked back since. 1997 started with victory in the British Championships, the prelude to a fantastic year which has taken him around the globe.

Cairns now earns exemptions into the top tournaments and has earned a good enough return to relieve him of the financial burden he faced earlier in his career.

"Victory in the first round of most major tournaments will pay for my flight," he says. "I still have to find money for equipment coaching and physiotherapy, but I'm earning quite a good living at the moment."

Cairns is sponsored by Cambridge company, Prince and he is hopeful of getting support from individual Lottery funding.

Hong Kong's Lottery proved a hit with Cairns after his doubles triumph. He shared a cool £7,500 with Wright after selecting five out of the six numbers to earn a \$52,000 payout.

His successful pairing with Walker should guarantee Cairns a ticket – to the Commonwealth Games in September – but his individual selection is in the balance with England sending a team of four to the Games.

Cairns defends his British title at Manchester's G-Mex Centre later this month when he is bidding to become the first man to retain the crown.

That success added another notch to the Cairns' success story and only the world championship remains missing from the handful of aims the Abingdon star set himself some years ago.

"If I win the world championship, I'll retire," Cairns declared. But for now he is taking a festive rest after the busiest schedule of his career, ahead of perhaps the busiest and most important year of his life.

**BEST FOOT FORWARD:** Mark Cairns faces one of the busiest years of his successful career in professional squash

Picture: John Gaisford