

Calling the shots

Ian McKenzie interviews new ESR chief executive Keir Worth about the challenges facing the association

When Keir Worth decided to return to England Squash and Racketball as their new chief executive, you could imagine that the 40-year-old may have woken up the day after his appointment and asked himself: "What have I done?"

Nick Rider, the previous chief executive, was with ESR for 12 years and spent in the region of £50million – but 'sales' went down. In the end, Sport England, who provided the cash, lost patience, cut the funding and he left soon afterwards.

"I come in with my eyes wide open. I know where the organisation is," says Worth, who moved from his role as performance director with British Shooting to take the ESR job.

Rider's departure followed a failure to hit participation targets and a demand by Sport England that ESR demonstrate "a rapid and significant improvement in leadership".

A new CEO was needed. Board member Susan Meadows, an experienced NHS manager, held the fort on a temporary basis and ESR used blue-chip recruitment agency Odgers

Berndtson to run a campaign which Worth eventually won.

"It is a job I knew I wanted at some stage," said Worth, who only left his post as ESR performance director in 2013. "I just didn't expect this opportunity to come up as quickly as it did. It is a big challenge now."

There is one advantage Worth has in taking the job – he is steeped in squash. There was always the danger that the job could have gone to someone who knew nothing about the sport and taken years to find out. However, Worth, who was born in Woolwich in South London, grew up in Eltham and played squash locally at the New Eltham club with players like Paul Johnson, Philip Yarrow, Johnny Russell and later Adrian Grant. He also played at

junior county level for Kent.

"I fell in love with the game when I was about 11," he said. "South-East London then was a thriving squash community."

His parents played – his father was a newsagent and mother a primary teacher – as did his two brothers.

"I took my first coaching qualification when I was 16," Worth said. "I always enjoyed coaching more than I did

Gloucestershire and went on to become a coach educator for ESR, teaching at levels one and two. He also did a variety of coaching – at county level and at the local club – before being appointed a regional coach and working with the national junior squads.

"I wanted to make a career out of coaching and moved to the University of Birmingham, where I worked for Zena Wooldridge [director of sport at the university and later chairman of ESR]," he said.

"I became more involved with England Squash, assisting on level three and with performance and coach education. Eventually, in 2006, I was offered the role of high performance coach, where I was responsible for junior and coach education."

When Peter Hirst left ESR, Worth was offered the job as performance director. Later Chris Robertson came in as national coach.

At the end of 2013 Worth moved to British Shooting. He had become frustrated with the leadership at ESR and decided to move on. Then the ESR job came up.

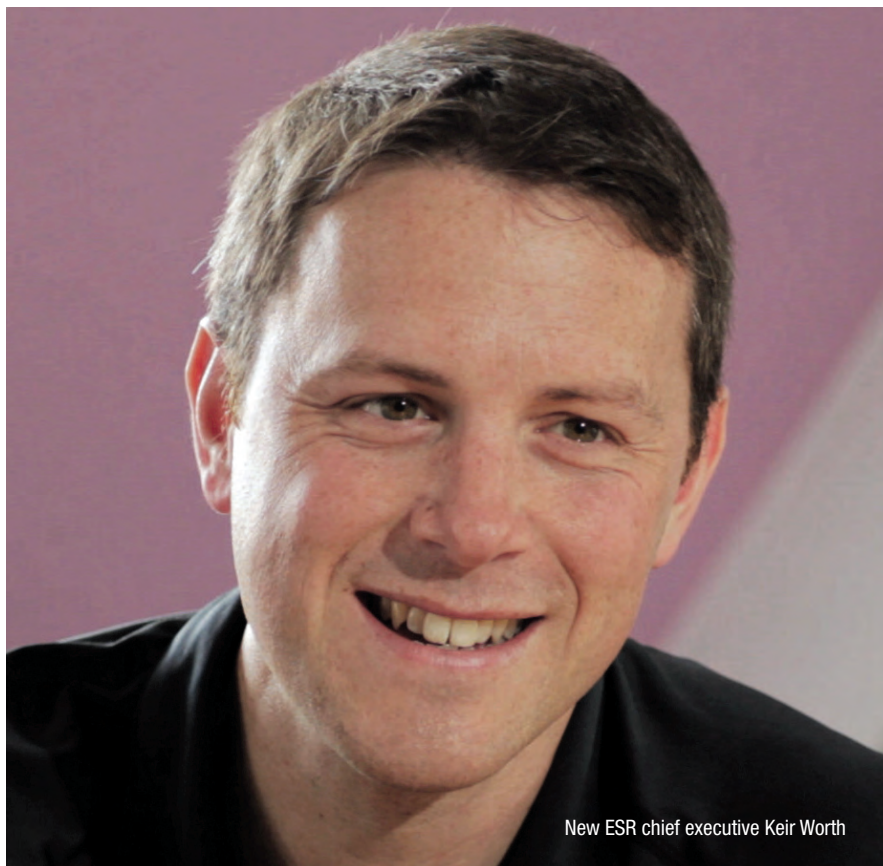
"I had conversations with people about whether I would apply, but I was never in doubt that I would," he said.

At ESR Worth will find a challenging environment. Firstly there are the cuts and secondly the targets.

"You could argue it is the right time to come in because things can only get better," he jokes.

How did the association get into this situation? England have been successful at elite level and perhaps that has obscured what has really been happening elsewhere. The fact that there was a lack of new talent coming into the sport was overlooked, so with England's stars now largely in their 30s, there will be a gap when they retire.

"Not enough was done when we lost a



New ESR chief executive Keir Worth

competing. I knew I wasn't good enough to play full time and I preferred helping others."

After leaving school, Worth went to Chichester University, where he did a sports science degree. On graduating, he spent a year in Loughborough, studying for a Master's degree in sports management, before returning to Chichester to do a PHD while coaching and lecturing.

Then disaster struck. Worth got chronic fatigue syndrome, the same illness that afflicted former world no.2 Peter Marshall. He spent a year in bed. "I wasn't well at all. That was my twenties gone," he recalls.

Worth then lectured in sports development at the University of

generation of players," Worth explains. "I was there [at ESR] from 2006 and there was not one single junior initiative while I was there."

Whatever the challenges of performance and elite player development, the key is participation.

"Performance is in a far better state than participation," says Worth. "The no. 1 priority is participation, getting more people playing. What that department does – how, where, when and why – has to be scrutinised. That is where a significant piece of the money will be spent.

"We have not just stopped hitting participation targets; we have not hit participation targets for some time.

"We need to look at the products. What are we providing these businesses, these clubs, that will help them go out and promote the sport?"

It will not be an easy job and maintaining the reduced funding coming from Sport England will be an important part in helping to achieve it.

There are those who see the perceived politically-correct hoops that sports have to jump through in a bid to obtain Sport England funding as counter-productive – that the associations have

become focused on fulfilling these requirements to perpetuate the organisations, rather than to think through from first principles what they should really be doing.

They see Sport England funding as having been mis-spent and as ineffective. In the harshest version of this view, they feel it has led to 'jobs for the boys'.

Worth refutes this view, but says he can see where some people may have got that impression.

"Sport England only want to support," he emphasises. "If the organisation doesn't make decisions, they will fill that void. It is incorrect to say that they have a politically correct agenda to force on the sport. It is not my experience.

"It will be an England Squash and Racketball strategy. We set the strategy and we submit that strategy to Sport England, and hope in return to get funding.

"There may be some guidance on the sort of things they want, but they want more people playing. Who and where and how and why, that is up to us. It is not a dictatorship. They are a partner. And they have in-house expertise that we need to call upon.

"In a mature relationship with a partner

you can question decisions and you can give a rationale. You can have a debate.

"In a non-mature relationship you don't. You just go 'Oh OK', you sit there and take it. That is not a particularly productive relationship to have."

Worth admits that at present ESR have no strategy, so he has plenty to do. Will he be bogged down by administration, in running the organisation, or will he be able to develop that strategy and improve the organisation's effectiveness?

"My job is to make sure the organisation turns itself around and operates successfully in terms of encouraging participation," he replies. "I need to make sure we have the right people in the right jobs doing the right things.

"It is my role to make sure the organisation has leadership and a strategy that will work. That strategy will need to be endorsed by the board.

"There are some very good people at ESR who haven't had the opportunity to put forward their ideas. It will be a team effort.

"If we get it right as an organisation, it is an exciting time for the game. If we don't get it right, the game will die... in this country anyway."

WORLD SQUASH

WORLD SQUASH

WSF



RESOURCES ARE NOT LIMITLESS

Chief executive ANDREW SHELLEY explains how the World Squash Federation is funded

Think of a national squash federation, consider the World Squash Federation and the same question inevitably arises. Can we have funding to allocate to this, money to spend on that or resources for something else?

Budgets depend on income and resources have to be spread across a number of areas.

For the WSF, like national federations, there are coaching, refereeing, rules, championships, technical equipment, media, marketing,

office and staff to consider.

The WSF also needs to maintain and develop relationships, not least as we push forward with the aim of securing a slot on the Olympic Games programme.

The WSF also has to fund an extensive and costly anti-doping testing programme to ensure that we are World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) compliant.

However, before we can spend anything at all, we have to bring funds in to do so.

The WSF is funded from a

combination of membership fees from countries, grants, fees from squash manufacturers for accreditation, SPIN and various other smaller streams.

The WSF doesn't have the benefit of tour player memberships, event registrations or broadcast rights. So, if you didn't know why the pot is not limitless, you do now!

WORLD SQUASH DAY

Squash clubs all over the world will be celebrating World Squash Day on Saturday, October 18 with a stimulating and varied programme of events.

World Squash Day gives clubs and federations the opportunity to promote the sport and add to the worldwide army of players in around 185 nations. Hopefully yours will be taking part.

Further information can be found on the World Squash Day Facebook page at: facebook.com/WorldSquashDay

MASTERS DATES

The next target for many of the players who enjoyed the recent World Masters Championships in Hong Kong may be one or both of the forthcoming multi-sport Masters Games.

First up are the European Masters Games, which take place at Nice in the South of France from October 1 to 15 next year and are expected to feature 10,000 players competing in 27 sports. Details can be found at: nice.fr/Sport-loisirs/European-Masters-Games-2015

Then in 2017, from April 21 to 30 to be exact, the World Masters Games will be held in Auckland, New Zealand.

With more athletes than the Olympics, these Games are the single biggest multi-sport event on earth.

If you want to be one of the 25,000 athletes expected at the Games and would like details, go to: worldmastersgames2017.co.nz