



Mike Dale visits the *Squash Player Club of the Year* and meets the dynamic duo **MICK TODD AND MALCOLM WILLSTROP**



Malcolm Willstrop

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CLUB OF THE YEAR 2015-16: PONTEFRACT

Squash Player’s panel of experts have sifted through nominations from around the country to select the club that best reflects its award criteria. This year the Club of the Year award goes to Pontefract. Mike Dale visits the Yorkshire outfit and regrets not taking his racket

The scene on walking into Pontefract Squash Club on an unseasonably hot April morning immediately encapsulates why it was named Club of the Year by *Squash Player’s* panel.

Legendary coach Malcolm Willstrop is directing a group session from the balcony. Among the players on court are Canadian no.2 Hollie Naughton, local PSA tyro Taminder Gata-Aura, Yorkshire League player Matt Godson and other club players who participate with equal enthusiasm. On another court England international Chris Simpson and New Zealand international Evan Williams are practising together.

An hour later children from nearby De Lacy Primary School file in. Some of them can barely hit the ball yet, but with Malcolm

prowling behind the four glass-back courts offering advice to his coaches, one suspects they will be playing 20-stroke rallies before too long. Later in the week free sessions are scheduled for kids with autism from nearby Pathways School.

It is this inclusiveness – blending world-class performance with grass-roots participation (sometimes together on the same court) – that sets Pontefract apart.

“It’s a members’ club with an open-door policy,” says CEO Mick Todd. “Anyone can

walk off the street and book a court. We have numerous local schools and community groups coming in to play, plus, at the top end, PSL, European club championships and a procession of top players training here.”

Countless stars have flocked from across the world to receive Malcolm’s wise counsel, many of them staying at the ‘squash house’ with Mick and his wife, Cindy. Japanese no.1 Misaki Kobayashi is set to be their next lodger.

Many will be familiar with the club’s reputation for pumping out world-class players, including two former world no.1s in Malcolm’s son, James, and three-time British champion Lee Beachill.

They reckon a third is in the pipeline. Malcolm is not a man prone to exaggeration and he is one of the most astute judges of young squash talent in the world, so when he says Sam Todd, Mick’s 13-year-old son, is going to be “among the world’s best”, it is a prediction that carries substance. His win at the British Junior Open in January made him the first home male BJO champion since James in 2002. “Everybody can tell a Pontefract player by how they play and behave,” says proud father Mick. “Sam is a breath of fresh air and a delight to watch. He plays sublimely, under Malcolm’s stewardship, and behaves immaculately.”

“Everybody gets treated the same. We’ve produced world no.1s, so if anyone comes in with airs and graces, we soon remind them where they are.” Mick Todd

Sam aside, the club’s junior scene is vibrant. Pontefract protégés Ben Beachill (U13), Benjamin Sockett (U15), Elliot Ridge (U17), Asia Harris (U13), Layla Johnson (U13), Amber Copley (U15) and Ellen Cooper (U17) are all currently at or near the summit in their respective England age-group rankings.

“Write these names down for your article too,” urges Malcolm. “George Barker and Fearné Copley.” They are five and six years old respectively. George, in particular, has every chance of making it, being the son of Keith, England Squash’s head of physical preparation.

Mick’s pride is obvious as he shows off the smart lounge, eight courts, fitness centre, dance studio and new badminton and table tennis halls, which are to become northern centres of excellence for their respective governing bodies.

The club has come a long way since he took it over 18 years ago. With just 50 members and leaking roofs, the place was on its knees. “Malcolm had to coach while holding an umbrella and there were buckets in the front corners!” remembers Mick. “They were dark days.”

Development firms were eyeing up the land as a potential town centre commercial site. Malcolm was mulling over a move to Nottingham Squash Club. It was at this point that Mick intervened and had he not done so, the club would not exist today. With the support of local MP Yvette Cooper and other investors, he dragged the club out of its seven years in receivership and gradually upgraded it to the top-class institution it is today, with almost 1,000 members and an international reputation.

Its success comes from the fusion between the perfect environment, created by Mick, and the expertise and dedication of Malcolm.

“If there were eight days in a week, he’d be here all eight of them,” says Mick of his right-hand man. “We come back from PSA events in China or Malaysia and I’ll come home and go to bed, but he’ll have breakfast, come straight here and take a session.”

Malcolm counters: “I’d be no good working somewhere that doesn’t foster that. Mick has built an environment that contains all the right ingredients – welcoming to children, families, the community, schools, with social activities and events. It’s only once you’ve achieved that, that you can produce top players.”



Pontefract CEO Mick Todd (left) and coach Malcolm Willstrop

The membership is a blend of the well-heeled and working class. Some of the visiting schoolchildren are cripplingly deprived. Malcolm comments: “It’s the classlessness of the place that breeds its wonderful atmosphere. Whoever comes in just feels welcome.”

The club’s own foundation and England Squash jointly fund a project which delivers educational workshops and squash lessons to children from Airedale Junior School.

“Some of these kids have no school uniform, let alone a racket. We outline what’s expected of them and how they’re to behave, and they love it. We care about them. They’re wonderful kids. It’s such rewarding work,” says Malcolm.

Not everyone enjoys their visits, though. On big team nights visiting players have been known to crumble in the intimidating atmosphere, which stems partly from its unique layout, with the large bar area situated directly behind several glass-backs.

“It comes from the local mining culture,” claims Mick, formerly in the industry himself. “We’re used to being half a mile underground, where there’s no escape from the banter.”

“It’s a goldfish bowl here, which creates a fantastic atmosphere.”

Yorkshire League deputy chairman Marc Thomas, who nominated Pontefract, said: “Pontefract just go from strength to strength.”

“They have an incredibly strong presence in the community, a strong focus on promoting ladies’ squash and continue to produce an outstanding number of junior county players and internationals.”

“The club is also a magnet for local amateurs and homegrown and overseas professionals. It’s an incredibly sociable place and a credit to squash.”



Criteria for Squash Player Club of the Year

- A welcoming environment
- A pro-active membership policy
- Significant achievement in competitions
- Supportive of county and England Squash events
- Good, if not excellent, presentation of facilities
- A comprehensive squash activities programme
- A very good coaching programme of lessons and classes
- Easily accessible junior activities, including after-school
- Partnership with schools and community groups
- A programme of social activities