

# CLUB OF THE YEAR 2016/17: MARKET HARBOROUGH

*Squash Player's panel of experts have this year selected a club bursting with innovative ideas and boundless enthusiasm for getting more people on court. Mike Dale finds a hotbed of grass-roots squash in the Leicestershire market town*

**With newly-extended facilities, an ever-growing membership, nine coaches, huge numbers of juniors and women, a legion of willing volunteers and even their own brands of beer, it is no surprise to hear the denizens of Market Harborough Squash Club deliver an upbeat view on squash's future.**

Steve and Alison Avil, the chairman and secretary respectively, have fostered an inclusive and vibrant ethos based on collective responsibility, and a belief that kindling children's love of the game is the basis of success. It's a philosophy that has achieved outstanding results.

"I don't care what anyone else is saying – we feel squash is an up-and-coming sport again," says Steve. With the club's membership rising from 110 to 265 in the last four years, his optimism is entirely justified. That success is largely down to their focus on youth.

"Juniors used to just be the kids of adult members, but that's a complacent way of thinking and if you rely on that pattern, it just leads to decreasing numbers," explains

Steve. "You can't just expect kids to come along and play these days; you've got to go out there and get them!"

Steve and Alison have taken every possible opportunity to put rackets into as many local young hands as possible, delivering fun mini squash sessions with rebound nets and balls in local primary schools, fetes and carnivals.

The club has offered free court time so that 45 students from two local secondary schools can play squash as part of their GCSE PE syllabus. They also facilitate children using squash to fulfil the physical activity and volunteering elements of their Duke of Edinburgh Awards, as well as giving the local Scouts free coaching and court time. There is an after-

school squash club for pupils at local schools and the club has linked up with the council to host sessions for disadvantaged children.

Alison hatched a plan to take old squash balls into local schools and ask children to come up with ideas for how to recycle them, with the winners chosen by the council's waste management team. The winning school got their own mini-squash kit thanks to sponsorship from a local rubber firm. A further seven kits and training were given to seven more schools with Postcode Lottery funding.

***"They're all absolutely loving it," reveals Alison. "One of the Scouts has essentially started living here. He's become completely obsessed with squash and is doing his Squash 101 course this weekend! It's great to see."***

Over 60 juniors come to coaching sessions on Saturday mornings delivered by some of the club's nine volunteer coaches, whose training the club has funded (many are former junior players themselves).

*Market Harborough Squash Club chairman and coach Steve Avil takes a junior session*





*Just some of Market Harborough Squash Club's many junior members*

The fulcrum of their youth policy is that all junior members are given free use of courts during off-peak hours. This has not only seen off-peak court usage go up 112% since the addition of two new courts in late 2015, but has brought in whole families and boosted the club's prosperity as a whole.

Alison says: "Clubs must bear in mind that they don't always need to charge for use of the facilities. Sometimes you need to offer certain loss-leaders in order to reap rewards later.

"There is no excuse for clubs with schools nearby not to get in there. There must be professional coaches out there kicking their heels during the day who could be going into schools to drum up long-term interest. Just come up with good ideas and go to Sport England, local sports partnerships and charities for grants, then follow it up with a welcoming atmosphere, beginners' sessions and a proper structure."

***Steve adds: "Our philosophy has always been to get the kids in. Even if their standard won't necessarily set the world on fire, it's all about enjoyment and keeping the club alive and vibrant. We've had so many parents become curious about the game, start playing and become members themselves. Keeping people active and healthy is the starting point. Then the club is the platform to develop club, county and hopefully national players in the future."***

Older juniors are encouraged to try their hand at coaching, a classic example being Tim Arthur, a long-time member who the club funded through his Level 1 qualification. He is now at university, running their team, but can't resist coming back to take Saturday morning sessions during the holidays. "The kids love him because he's so talented and his sessions are such fun. He shows them just how far squash can take them," observes Steve.

The drive for participation doesn't just apply to juniors. The council's Active Harborough team started the 'Just' campaign (linked to This Girl Can) which funded female-only coaching sessions and free rackets and balls for participants to keep. Sixteen women became members as a result. The 'Just' ladies were invited to the ladies' club night to mix with members.

One of the first 'Just' campaign participants, Donna Bee, has since turned her father, husband and kids into regular players. She was voted this year's Player of the Season and her catering firm provided the canapés for the club's annual casino and cocktail evening.

That is just one example of players offering their own expertise, making it the epitome of how a members' sports club should be run. During the facility renovations and addition of two new courts 18 months ago, over 50 members mucked in, from architects to joiners, electricians and painters.

"It gives us great flexibility being a members' club, because it means everybody has ownership," says Steve. "Everybody should be getting involved and doing something to help, because it's their club. Whenever we get a new member, we're always picking their brains to see what they can contribute! The whole point of having a committee is being able to break down smaller roles, so that they aren't too intimidating for people to take on."

Those renovations cost £340,000, paid for by grants from Sport England's 'Inspired Facilities', England Squash, Harborough District Council and local charity Market Harborough and the Bowdens. The members also "bought a brick", gave loans and advanced memberships which totalled £80,000, an incredible display of commitment.

The expansion has allowed the club to flourish further, with capacity for even more coaching sessions, six competitive teams in the Leicester and Northampton leagues, two ladies' teams and Squash 57

teams. They have also hosted inter-county matches and this year's Leicestershire County Championships.

Visiting teams can often be heard lauding the quality of the food, supplied by the nearby Angel Hotel, and there is a tradition of post-match cheese and biscuits with port after Friday night games. The club even has its own in-house beers, called 'The Squash Player' and 'The Racketballer', supplied by the local Langton brewery.

Alison, who is a physiotherapist, was named Unsung Hero of the Year at the Harborough Sports Awards before Christmas, as well as winning the School and Community Partnership Award at the South Leicestershire School Sports Partnership Awards. She and Steve, who is a podiatrist and lecturer, serve as chairman and secretary of the neighbouring cricket club too.

***Steve comments: "We put a lot of hours in, but the rewards are so great when you see people really being active, enjoying the sport, the club, its atmosphere and activities. We've got a great bunch of members and friends. Squash seems to attract great people. We try to get as many people as possible to help, but we drive it forwards and we know that doesn't go unappreciated."***

Leicestershire league and county secretary Michael Blasdale, who nominated Market Harborough for the Club of the Year award, concludes: "Steve and Alison are the main driving forces behind the club's success. There's no financial incentive for them; they just love their squash. It's a tremendous success story.

"They are the most progressive club in our county, with more ladies and juniors playing than any other club I know. They just try to think of any way whatsoever to get another person to come and play squash. The fact it's all driven by volunteers tops it all off."