

FONTAINE'S FRESH APPROACH

Richard Eaton speaks to new WSF president Jacques Fontaine about the initial aims of his reign

Squash's hopes of earning an Olympic place will be revived by a completely new approach, according to Jacques Fontaine, who became president of the World Squash Federation (WSF) after the most bizarrely protracted election in the governing body's history.

A successful entrepreneur for French squash, Fontaine hopes to utilise similar abilities to create new forms of WSF governance and a different image for squash in another bid to get into the Games.

"We must act quickly on the Olympic agenda, rebrand our sport and work closely with all stakeholders without exclusion," Fontaine stressed, an apparent reference to allegations that the Professional Squash Association (PSA) was not sufficiently involved during the WSF's 2020 Olympics campaign.

His words are a welcome move away from the trauma of the failed Tokyo Games bid and from uncertainties during the last weeks of Narayana Ramachandran's eight-year presidency.

Fontaine knows plenty about moving on. The 69-year-old began playing four decades ago in French leagues, before leading club teams at Capitol Saint Cloud to a vast array of national and European men's and women's titles.

Another big step came 20 years ago, when Fontaine became president of the Fédération Française de Squash. It steadily created 220 affiliated clubs and 340 squash sport associations, helped develop two world champions (Thierry Lincou and Gregory Gaultier) and organised France's first men's and women's World Team Championships.

By then Fontaine was a board member of the French National Olympic Committee too. All these achievements revealed qualities he may now need more than ever: high ambition, broad vision and an ability to generate funding, as well as surprising forthrightness.

Typically, he wasted no time in asserting new measures, beginning with an urgent strategy for gaining acceptance to the 2024 Games.

"It's paramount to increase the international profile of squash or we will never get in," he warned.

Fontaine discussing Olympic entry

"A dedicated taskforce is being recruited to lead the next Olympic bid and our athletes will have a key role in this process," he said.

"Obviously, squash seemed to be lacking some key ingredients. It is critical we fully understand the reasons for our failure. This will be the highest priority of the WSF board and its taskforce."

So something different may be coming from Fontaine. "Definitely we need to think outside the box," he agreed. "We need to fully understand the expectations of the IOC and demonstrate how squash can contribute to the Olympic Movement and to the success of the Games."

"The entire squash world must work together to make our sport great and not wait for the Olympics to do it for us."

He is clearly mindful of the rifts which followed the Tokyo setback. These brought strong criticisms from the PSA and a coalition of national federations reportedly seeking to operate independently.

"The Olympic doors were never as open as they were for Tokyo 2020," Fontaine acknowledged rather dramatically, supporting a PSA view that a great opportunity had been missed. He later claimed that the WSF and the PSA are "now on the same page".

What is sure is Fontaine's ability to ruffle feathers. That was evident during an astonishing presidential election, in which

he appealed against the announcement of Zena Wooldridge as winner, forced a recount which revised the outcome into a tie and achieved an improbable victory with a rerun.

The restarted vice-presidential election then extended the rigmarole to 29 ballots and eight hours – causing the WSF's eviction from its Hong Kong hotel room by a wedding reception and relocation to the Happy Valley sporting club. One hopes this emotion is an omen.

Since then a reformed model of governance has become a further priority. "The board will develop a multi-strategic plan with all our stakeholders," Fontaine promised.

"It will formalise a memorandum of understanding with the PSA, introduce a formal risk management process and increase the voices of member national associations, regional federations and athletes in decision-making."

This underlines the limitations of a five-member board and a need for stronger committee structures, all following IOC guidelines.

After this, little more can be done to enhance a 2024 Olympic bid until the host city is chosen in September. Then Fontaine will face new realities in achieving squash's greatest dream.

