

SQUASH'S FRENCH CONNECTION

Olympic squash advocate Rod Gilmour sees hope in the hosting city competition and a possible flexibility in considering new sports

As squash fans and keen observers of the sport have come to realise in recent years, nothing is certain when it comes to the International Olympic Committee.

Despite squash having showcased every last sinew of its Olympic capabilities over the last three bids to IOC suits, inclusion in the greatest sporting show on the planet still remains at arm's length and increasingly frustrating.

And so the time has come when squash turns its attentions to vying for a place at the 2024 Games – though there are different caveats to adhere to over the coming months.

Rather than new sports compiling bid dossiers, it was announced at SportAccord (the international federations' union congress) in April that a host city could put forward a sport for inclusion, with final ratification made by the IOC.

The committee decided last year to include sport climbing, skateboarding, surfing, baseball, softball and karate – much to the chagrin of squash, but understandable given that these were put forward by the Tokyo organisers – ahead of the 2020 jamboree.

"We want to take sport to the youth," IOC president Thomas Bach said earlier this year. Sure enough, in June, 3x3 basketball and BMX freestyle cycling were then added to the programme as part of the committee's overarching bid to appeal to a more urban audience.

It is these IOC agendas which will hold sway when its executive board awards both the 2024 and 2028 Olympics in September. At the time of writing, Paris is likely to host

the 2024 Games, with Los Angeles slated for 2028.

It is Paris which holds extra interest for squash. The World Squash Federation has a Frenchman, Jacques Fontaine, as president, Gregory Gaultier is the men's world no.1, Camille Serme is in the women's world top three and France's national team have been increasingly successful in recent years.

Fontaine is also a French National Olympic Committee board member and will be a pivotal player in making squash's plea for inclusion in seven years' time.

"There is a small window of opportunity," Fontaine told Squash Player. "We are not unknown and outside of the global picture. We do have a certain weight, but the fight will be tough."

Fontaine says that squash must find a "new language" to finally muscle its way towards an Olympic berth.

So, if the IOC is aware of squash – previous bids have told of squash's environment-friendly outlook, drop-in courts, cost-effective temporary venues and gender equality etc – how will the sport stand out in the coming months?

One lobbying aspect must surely be to include the innovative work being created by Interactive Squash, with its technology-driven interface for the front wall.

STOP PRESS

Paris looks certain to stage the 2024 Olympic Games, after Los Angeles officially declared its candidature in July to host the 2028 Games.

IOC president Thomas Bach welcomed LA's decision and said it would be put forward to the IOC session in Lima in September for ratification.

He added: "We are very confident that we can reach a tripartite agreement under the leadership of the IOC with LA and Paris in August, creating a win-win-win situation for all three partners."

The Munich-based company's mission is to revolutionise squash by transforming existing courts into interactive facilities; all crucial, it would seem, to attracting a younger audience.

Another key proposal to consider is the Games format. With the IOC also ratifying a number of mixed-team events for 2020, swimming and triathlon in particular, the same could also be applied to squash. In the past, squash has proposed men's and women's singles draws. However, capping the singles to, say, a 32-strong draw – and even looking into a best-of-three format – could allow space for a mixed-team event.

It's early days, of course, and Fontaine says that the WSF and the PSA (both bodies are now working in unison) had discussed the bidding structure over the summer during a brainstorming session. Fontaine added: ***"We have to employ new elements to boost our proposal and we have to show we are different from the other sports."***

Naturally, the Frenchman has allowed himself a lofty peek into the future as to a potential 2024 venue. Fontaine believes that squash could easily be staged on one of the hills which surround the Parisian capital. From there, the global audience "would see that squash has Paris at its feet".

For now, the sport is just a few small steps into plotting another Olympic path.

Right: World Squash Federation president Jacques Fontaine. Could squash be staged on a hill overlooking Paris for an Olympic Games in the French capital, such as Sacré-Coeur?

