



HARFORD'S WYCLIFFE DREAM

Jonny Harford, director of squash at Wycliffe College, tells Rod Gilmour why he has the ideal job

It is still the height of summer and Jonny Harford, director of squash at Wycliffe College, has yet to have a proper break – a rarity for any teacher. No time for a holiday before the Michaelmas term? “Far from it,” he says. “I can’t really stop.”

There is the Wycliffe Open to organise, summer camps to attend to and he sees his College pupils (who live close to the Gloucestershire school) when he can. In the past there have been two coaches, but now the squad is smaller and he has full ownership of the programme. The administration side takes up time, not something Harford is used to, being a former tour professional.

Thus, this is no ordinary squash job. After all, Wycliffe is the only school in the country which sees squash as its no.1 sport.

Harford, a 30-year-old former Wycliffe pupil, has been in charge for two years. He follows in the footsteps of veteran Dave Morrish, who ended his tenure in dream-like fashion, guiding Wycliffe to under-15 and under-19 National Schools titles, the first time a school had achieved this feat in the championships’ 70-year history.

“It was perhaps the only job in England that interested me at the time,” says Harford, whose career was curtailed by a hip injury, leaving him little option but to pursue the Wycliffe opening.

“I perhaps had something to offer on the circuit, but it was a great opportunity at the time, to work day in, day out with kids who wanted to play squash.”

Harford, who reached the final of the World Junior Championship with England

Jonny Harford (second left) with his Wycliffe College squash squad

under-19s, will have 14 full-time students under his wing this year, a mix of borders and day pupils. If his summer was busy, term-time will be even busier.

“Sometimes we don’t get a day off from each other for three weeks, if there is a tournament or we have to go away,” he says.

Every weekday Harford oversees a 90-minute group session after school, while a 40-minute physical class takes place every other day. He admits to being “quite personable” and tries to relate to his students. To them, he’s Jonny, not Mr Harford, and this attitude reflects in his coaching.

He says: “We have fun, but I like for them to train properly and be switched on. It all depends on the individual.”

One pupil who currently stands out is Lyell Fuller, the England under-19 player who is only 17 and is a likely contender to follow the PSA Tour path of Botswana’s Alister Walker and Anthony Graham, both former alumni.

“All Lyell wants is to be a professional player,” says Harford. “He is just starting to mature. The next year will be his starting point.

“There are others who enjoy playing, but perhaps it won’t be a major part of their future life.”

Harford promises not to be as harsh on these players unless they are “disrupting everyone”. Most share a common bond, though, watching PSA’s Squash TV and asking questions about the modern professionals.

One reason why the College has garnered success (Wycliffe went seven years unbeaten at under-15 level up until 2011) is their policy to introduce the seven to nine-year-old age group to squash.

Harford believes that the junior game has come on markedly since his days at Wycliffe. “In the English game there is a tendency to be more attacking,” he admits. “There are more errors thrown in, more shots gone for.

“I encourage that as a coach. I know that the front corners have come into play more. I know when I was younger I played more defensively and wore people down, as my fitness levels were too good.”

Harford tries to get his charges to “express

themselves” and play attacking balls, realising that the game is now bringing on talents from unusual outposts such as Peru and Qatar. The Englishman also knows that the pool of players in this country is diminishing, which is a worry.

However, Harford is still enthused by the arrival of one foreign recruit – Mohammad Alsarraj, of Jordan, who reached the under-15 final at the British Junior Open. Harford is keen to compare his development to that of English juniors.

Wycliffe continues to stand out as a school which devotes itself to squash. The courts and sports hall are both situated around the main cricket square. It’s very compact with an almost family feel and you certainly don’t have to travel 30 minutes to have a hit. It’s classroom to squash court in under a minute here in the heart of Gloucestershire.

“It is intimate, but you can’t escape into the background either,” adds Harford.

With squash in the foreground, Harford is in a unique position to keep the sport flourishing.

