

SQUASH ON ITS KNEES?



We have all seen and heard evidence of squash's decline, but what really is the state of the game in the sport's mother country? Ian McKenzie searches for some facts

Even before this ghastly year began, many perceived squash to be shrinking in England. But beyond anecdotal evidence, what are the bald facts about the state of our beloved sport?

No mechanism or membership system exists in England to count all players. We can, however, get indicators of participation: club membership, court usage, participation in competitions and numbers of teams in county leagues, for example. We can measure the publicity the sport gets in TV and online coverage and audiences. We can also monitor sales of rackets and balls as well as courts built and courts pulled down.

Courts are built during a squash boom. People discover the game's best facets – pace, skills, shots, tactics, fitness and close-quarters duelling – quickly become enthused, demand is created and courts are built.

The first squash boom was wiped out by World War II and it wasn't until the mid-70s that numbers rocketed again, with up to three million players and courts springing up everywhere. By the mid-80s it was fading and by the end of the decade it had ended. Very approximately, we moved from three million players in 1980 to: 1990: two million; 2000: one million; 2010: half a million.

In another development, significant state (government and National Lottery) funding moved into sport, firstly funding elite development and later grassroots participation programmes.

Having dished it out, Sport England understandably wished to see the impact of this funding, began some research and were told by (naturally self-interested) recipients of the money how successful their programmes had been. Objective research was needed, and this came in the form of the Active People Survey which was carried out over 10 years, superseded by the Active Lives Survey. These featured an impressive 200,000 respondents providing in-depth details of many aspects of their lives including participation in sport and physical activity.

The Active People Survey categorises two 'types' of squash player: a once a month (or more) player; and a once a week (or more) player. The later Active Lives Survey (which frustratingly does not tie up methodologically with the previous survey) adjusts these categories to: once a year (or more); and twice in the last 28 days (or more). Let's take a look:

Active People Survey	2005/6	2015/16	% decline	(2018/19)
Once a month:	500,000	312,800	37.5%	(277,620)
Once a week:	299,800	199,500	33%	(179,750)

(Projected)

Active Lives Survey (Nov)	2015/16	2018/19	% decline
Once in year:	1,214,900	1,056,300	13%
Twice in 28 days:	425,600	294,600	31%

It is clear that a steady 3-4% annual decline over 10 years has accelerated. The decline in regular players (twice in 28 days or more) is 30% over three years. There is no sugar-coating it. This is a crisis.

There are attempts to take some solace in what ostensibly is a significant remaining number of squash players – one million. You may have seen this figure quoted. However, interrogation of Sport England's public survey reveals that 50% of the casual (once a year or more) players did not play in the last three months; 30% did not play for a whole six months. No comfort can be taken from this 'one million' figure.

Probe the data further for gender and age outcomes and you really find where we are.

Gender	2018/19	Male	%	Female	%
Once a Year:		794,700	75%	266,700	25%
Twice in 28 days:		241,900	82%	52,300	18%

Males	2015/16	2018/19	% decline
16-24:	103,100	53,500	48%
25-34:	114,400	67,400	41%

This shocking 48% decline in young male players has taken place in just three years. The ramifications for the future of the sport would be deeply concerning under normal circumstances, but this snapshot was taken in 2018/19 – before coronavirus hit! It is simply devastating. Where on earth do we go from here?

NOTE: If we extrapolate the Active Lives trend at the 10-year rate we get around 180,000 current weekly players. If we use the greater 30% decline rate in the Active Lives Survey we get an estimate of 140,000 weekly players.

SQUASH PARTICIPATION IN ENGLAND (PRE-COVID)

- The consistent decline rate in regular squash players of 3-4% a year from 2005/6 - 2015/16 has accelerated to 10% a year over three years
- Active People Survey (projected 2018/19): Monthly players: 280,000; Weekly: 180,000
- Active Lives Survey: Once a year (casual): one million; twice in 28 days (regular): 300,000
- Women account for 18% of regular players
- The participation of young male players (the largest participation group) has collapsed dramatically with the decline approaching 50% in three years