

Court on the Rebound

Dominic Bliss interviews Rebound International owner Simon Barker about his successful squash court wall manufacturing business

Royalty, politicians, the armed forces – Simon Barker's squash courts have been graced by a whole host of international VIPs at one time or another.

They include Prince Rainier of Monaco; Hosni Mubarak, the ex-Egyptian president; United Nations staff in Sudan; various high-ranked military across the Middle East; and even Juan Carlos I, the former king of Spain. "Our Spanish agent played against him on that court," Barker says of Juan Carlos. "And rumour has it he lost very gracefully to him. He might have been in trouble if he hadn't!"

Barker is the owner and boss of Rebound International, a Manchester-based manufacturer of squash court wall plaster, which has been in business for the last 40 years.

Originally set up by Barker's father in 1975, the company has installed walls on around 1,100 courts in over 40 countries worldwide, but predominantly in South-East Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

According to Barker, the material they use – white cement, alkali-resistant glass fibres and carefully selected aggregates – is so hard-wearing that it lasts for decades.

"That's why I'm poor," he jokes. "No repeat business. People don't want to refurbish courts, particularly in the Third World. They want to build it and that's the end of it."

Barker says the robustness of his court walls means he has been able to specialise in problem areas. "Projects like damp buildings, basements, structurally weak buildings," he explains. "Our product will actually hold the walls up. It doesn't fail. It takes a hell of a lot of punishment. In Asia, for example, some of the building standards are not the highest. But with our project, if the roof or

air conditioning fails, or it floods, it's not a problem."

He cites the example of courts they built in the Italian city of Padua, which flooded, but subsequently saw no damage to the plaster.

Barker makes some very bold claims about his walls. He says they have an impact resistance up to six times greater than plaster-based wall coatings, a tensile strength equal to their compressive strength and that they are not affected by humidity or condensation. They are naturally white and so do not require painting. The World Squash Federation is certainly impressed – it has certified Rebound's walls for the last 30 years.

Typically, when commissioned to construct a wall, Barker sends a supervisor to the squash club in question, who then trains up a local team of plasterers.

The company currently has 32 agents worldwide who promote their services. "Having a competent local agent is critical," Barker explains. "It doesn't work without them. They have to ease things through. We've been to jobs where there's no air conditioning, no water, no electricity."

Barker first started working for his father's firm at the age of 14 during his school holidays, gradually learning the trade until, 22 years ago, he took over the business.

As well as the VIPs mentioned above, he has worked with some impressive

clients, including the 2015 South-East Asian Games in Singapore, the 2015 Commonwealth Youth Games in Samoa, the Hong Kong Squash Centre, the Gezira Sporting Club and the American University in Cairo.

In fact, Egypt, arguably the most squash-mad nation on the planet, is a lucrative market for Rebound. "We've continued supplying and working in Egypt throughout all the troubles over the past few years," Barker says. "I remember going there to supervise a project right in the middle of the troubles. At one point I drove over the road when they were all rioting in Tahrir Square. It affected business a little bit, but I found squash is a game that brings people together. Even people who were on different sides of the sectarian [divide], they seemed to leave all that behind when it came to squash. All the clubs are peaceful oases, very relaxed, tranquil places. You wouldn't think anything was going on."

Barker also wins many contracts for military squash courts. "Perhaps they like the idea that our product is pretty much bullet-proof," he says. Then he recalls how his father used to supply Rebound plaster to the British Army in Northern Ireland during the troubles so they could "render block walls to give them more ballistic protection". "You'd render a wall and it would stop a bullet," he adds.

Barker used to play squash regularly himself, but that was a long time ago, for the school team when he was growing up in Yorkshire. Now a dodgy leg and a knee operation have put paid to his playing days. The last time he struck a ball in anger was at Tame Valley Tennis and Squash Club, a couple of miles from his home in the eastern suburbs of Manchester. "That's a Rebound surface," he adds proudly.

Simon Barker (left) on site at the Gezira club in Cairo with the project manager Mr Hussein

