

Sky's the limit

Rod Gilmour charts how Sky Sports' much-praised coverage of the World Series Finals began and calls on other broadcasters to match it

January is usually a time when Queen's Club members venture onto the ski slopes. It is also a pursuit that nearly curtailed squash's fresh-faced exposure on Sky Sports.

But thanks to dogged determination by Alex Gough, the Professional Squash Association's chief executive, the World Series Finals have now been screened live for two years amid great fanfare from those within the sport.

The story goes that Gough had been battling to get Sky Sports executives to come and see the Queen's Club set-up. Many calls had gone unreturned.

However, a chance meeting one wintery night in the build-up to the 2011 Finals changed all that. Gough met David Tarsh, chair of Queen's Club's squash committee, who has been instrumental in the smooth running of the end-of-season event.

Tarsh happened to notice that Stephen Nuttall, BSkyB's then commercial director, was playing that night. "Alex, tell Steve what you told me," he said when Nuttall stepped off court.

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Gough stuck
his neck out

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Seconds later Nuttall was on the phone to Sue Ashworth, one of Sky's senior female commercial executives, and the rest is history. Ashworth came down to view the set-up – it is important to note that she didn't actually watch any squash

– and the deal was sealed.

A year later Sky Sports was broadcasting live, although the deal still hinged on the January dates at Queen's, who offer the venue for free. The first week was initially a no-go as far as sceptical Queen's members were concerned, with most out on the slopes, while the second week was a dead end for Sky Sports.

Tarsh recalls several tense meetings. With Ziad Al-Turki, PSA's chairman and principal backer of the Queen's event, undecided over whether to plump for bums on seats over TV, Gough "stuck his neck out", according to Tarsh, even if it meant that he and Gough "weren't particularly popular with the members" once dates had been settled.

However, two years on and Al-Turki admits that "it has now found its niche in the world calendar."



SquashTV commentators Joey Barrington (left) and Paul Johnson

"We have taken to standardising the event and it is what the players can expect from going to a big tournament," he added.

Meanwhile, Gough says: "We are not a million miles off replicating the World Series Finals 12 to 15 times a year at our other events."

One Sky employee at the Queen's event this year said that it was the smoothest event he had worked on in the industry.

One factor has been Sky leaving production matters to SquashTV. A consistent output over the last few years has paid off for the PSA Tour's television arm, the latest coup seeing Eurosport 2 take the feed for the London Finals.

"It is a high-level product now and it shows the ambition of the sport," says Mark Bousfield, SquashTV's director.

I sat in on two matches at December's World Championship in Doha and was struck by one common theme – a clear love and knowledge of squash from the production crew.

Some critics, limited in capacity when it comes to watching squash on TV, stick to the notion that it is impossible to recreate the intensity on court. Well, SquashTV do a very good job in trying to appease.

One immediate thought when watching the Gregory Gaultier v Ramy Ashour showdown in Doha was the interaction between player and viewer. The director controlled the warm-up with short close-ups and then panned to the crowd before ordering the head-to-heads on to the screen. With such confined spaces on court to work with, it was done remarkably well, especially when you consider that SquashTV had only one director, a graphics man, a replay operator, two engineers and a front-wall cameraman. There are even fewer staff at other events.

Squash's seven steps for

HOSPITALITY

As seen at December's ATP World Tennis Tour Finals at the O2 in London, TV exposure adds cachet. The sport has to create an event and a special venue, and Queen's delivers on both fronts. "The World Series Finals is a cracking hospitality proposition ready to be exploited," says David Tarsh, of Queen's Club. "Who on earth would do hospitality in the first week of January? The smart people." What he means is that after the Christmas period, the event is fresh in a client's mind and there is a guarantee of luring key company decision-makers who are not likely to be engaged elsewhere.

FRONT WALL

The PSA are looking to standardise all World Series events. In some tournaments there are too many logos on the front wall, some "garish bright yellow and not in shot", according to the PSA. Squash chiefs are aiming to streamline the look and feel throughout the year so that the viewer is comfortable with what they are watching. The front wall is also seen as a space for creating more visual graphics and possibly video replays.

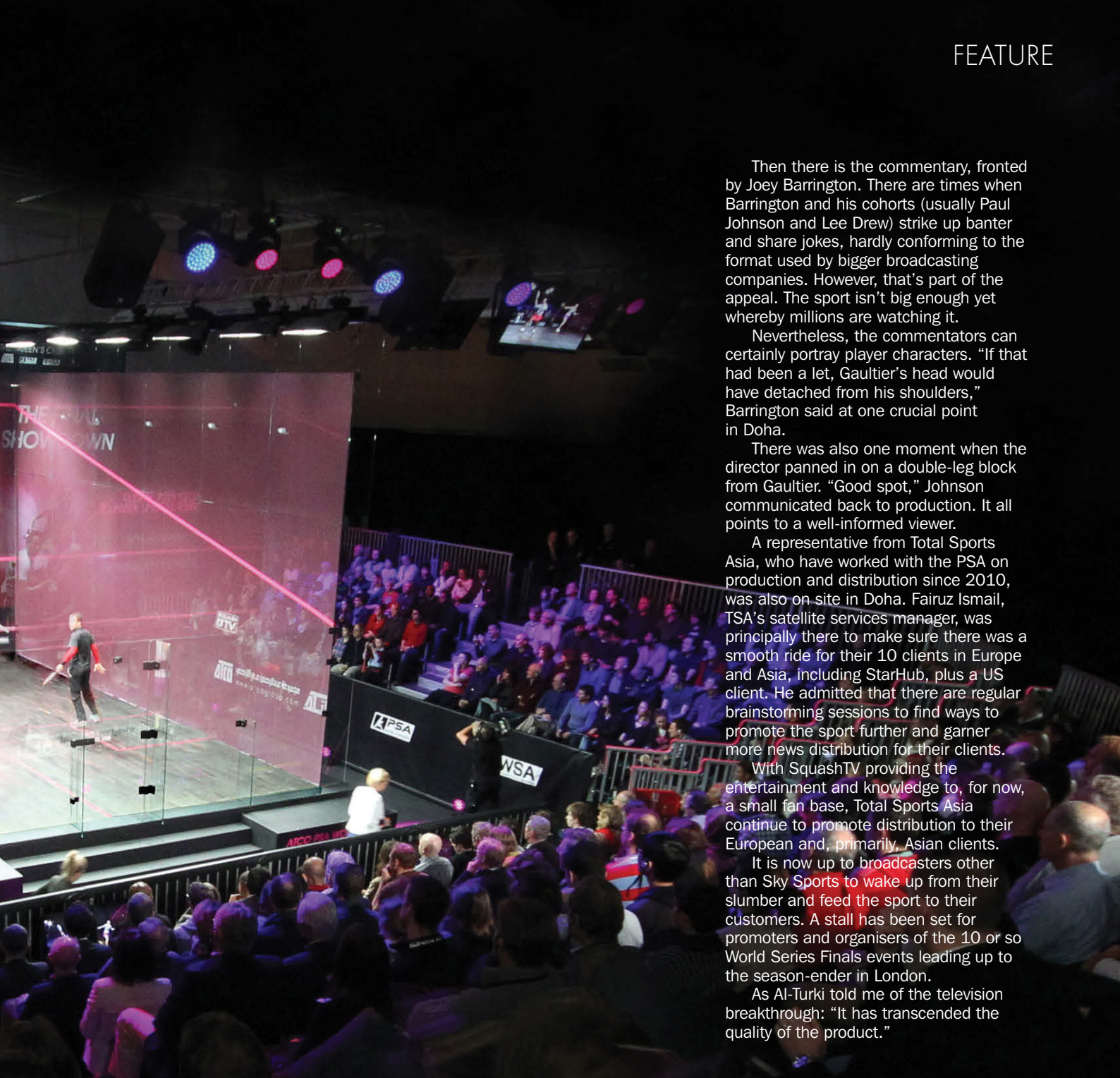
DOORS

The El Gouna International in Egypt saw the court door positioned on the right-

hand wall, close to the tin, but as far as implementing this idea at other tournaments, these are uncharted waters. Moving the court furniture away from the back wall brings a much clearer picture without the extra hinges. "If there is a market for this, then it will be good for us," is the PSA's view.

COVERAGE

SquashTV is viewed as a success thanks to its slick production. The key for the PSA World Tour now is finding ways to market the sport through television. The PSA plan to test a live TV draw for May's British Open in Hull ahead of the World



the future

Championship in Manchester later in the year. A monthly TV magazine show is also being mooted in the summer. However, the Finals could benefit from more marketing being done to attract SquashTV subscribers.

LIGHTING

Regarded as a key part of the live TV offering. Officials are exploring different ways to increase the LED lighting to cope with SquashTV's extreme super slow motion, which shows players' athleticism and skill to great effect. Currently 800 frames per second are being used and production would like to treble this, which

would necessitate enhancing the lighting. As for snazzy lighting similar to the Queen's event – and seen during the World Team Championship in Paderborn last year – the PSA are recommending it to promoters, but are not insisting on it.

FLOOR

The World Series Finals and Hong Kong Open currently use ASB's darker concept flooring, which yields the best viewing for the white ball. The McWil court, employed at the Tournament of Champions in New York and the North American Open in Virginia, has a lighter floor, but recent

Then there is the commentary, fronted by Joey Barrington. There are times when Barrington and his cohorts (usually Paul Johnson and Lee Drew) strike up banter and share jokes, hardly conforming to the format used by bigger broadcasting companies. However, that's part of the appeal. The sport isn't big enough yet whereby millions are watching it.

Nevertheless, the commentators can certainly portray player characters. "If that had been a let, Gaultier's head would have detached from his shoulders," Barrington said at one crucial point in Doha.

There was also one moment when the director panned in on a double-leg block from Gaultier. "Good spot," Johnson communicated back to production. It all points to a well-informed viewer.

A representative from Total Sports Asia, who have worked with the PSA on production and distribution since 2010, was also on site in Doha. Fairuz Ismail, TSA's satellite services manager, was principally there to make sure there was a smooth ride for their 10 clients in Europe and Asia, including StarHub, plus a US client. He admitted that there are regular brainstorming sessions to find ways to promote the sport further and garner more news distribution for their clients.

With SquashTV providing the entertainment and knowledge to, for now, a small fan base, Total Sports Asia continue to promote distribution to their European and, primarily, Asian clients.

It is now up to broadcasters other than Sky Sports to wake up from their slumber and feed the sport to their customers. A stall has been set for promoters and organisers of the 10 or so World Series Finals events leading up to the season-ender in London.

As Al-Turki told me of the television breakthrough: "It has transcended the quality of the product."

reviews after the ToC event concluded that TV production was "crystal clear". That bodes well for the growth of the North American TV market.

TIN

The familiar visuals of rolling adverts on the sponsorship hoardings at football matches are also being looked at for squash. The tin is seen as a key area to exploit sponsors' messages (in between games), while there is more scope and flexibility for displaying match scores and ticker messages there as well.